



















# THEATRE



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*Harold Hobson*

*With Photographs*



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*To*  
*My Mother and Father*  
*in all affection*

## *ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*

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## PREFACE

THIS book is a matter of record. It gives an account of what has happened in the theatre since I began to work as dramatic critic for the *Sunday Times*, first as James Agate's deputy, and then as his successor.

One of the first plays I was called on to notice was Jean Cocteau's *The Eagle Has Two Heads*, then at the Lyric, Hammersmith. In this piece Miss Eileen Herlie, as the young queen who went to death as to a bridal, made the most widely publicized success that any actor or actress has achieved in recent years. Neither Laurence Olivier's *Lear* nor Ralph Richardson's *Falstaff* was made the subject of so much comment, of so many stories.

But it so happened that I did not rate Miss Herlie's performance as highly as did many of my colleagues; and, on thinking the matter over, it seemed to me unfair to include in this volume my own somewhat qualified appreciation of her achievement without also indicating that other people well able to judge had given her far more generous praise. I do not mean that I was shaken in my opinion; what I do mean is that my opinion is not one that held, or holds, the field, or Miss Herlie would not have been awarded the Embassy prize for the best performance of the year.

I therefore determined to indicate, from the correspondence I received when my views of her play became known, how far they differed from the general estimate. It seemed to me, on reflection, a good thing to follow a similar policy with other productions. So from time to time I have made quotations from various correspondents, in order to give a more all-round view of the contemporary drama. It is with the same object—and also because from my youth upwards I have gathered jewels wherever I have found them—that I have on several occasions quoted the judgments of such eminent colleagues of mine as Mr. W. A. Darlington, Mr. Alan Dent, Mr. Ivor Brown, Mr. Hubert Griffith, and Mr. J. C. Trewin.

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In other words, in this book I am an engineer who, for conscientious reasons, is accompanied by a self-destructive petard.

Looking through my recent correspondence, I have come to certain conclusions, not so much about playwrights, as about their supporters. Mr. John Van Druten's admirers, for example, appear to be a singularly touchy lot. They show extreme annoyance whenever the master's work (for which I have a great respect) is adversely criticized. After the presentation of *The Voice of the Turtle* at the Piccadilly, the spokesmen of Mr. Van Druten's public rounded on me with the argument, "You have never written a play yourself. So it is impertinence to say Mr. Van Druten's is no good"; which reminds one of that other example of irrefutable logic, "You have never made a motor-car yourself: how dare you say this one stalls?" Or even of Aristotle's remark, that the best judge of a feast is not the cook, but the guest.

Except in rare cases I find that the supporters of Mr. J. B. Priestley do not show quite the same energy in attack. I think that Mr. Priestley is one of the three greatest of living dramatists. Among the most moving things I have seen in the theatre was the ending to *Johnson Over Jordan*, when Johnson, with his bowler hat and his attaché case, stood in the middle of the empty stage, and said very slowly, "Thine is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: for ever and ever, Amen"; and then walked off through the clouds and the darkness, into that not now frightening future, with his chin up and his shoulders squared. *Johnson Over Jordan* had only a comparatively short run when it was produced in London in the 1930's; and I find it an unaccountably underrated play. Mr. Rex Pogson, who has written an admirable and appreciative study of *J. B. Priestley and the Theatre*, likes it distinctly less well than some other Priestley plays. I believe that even Sir Ralph Richardson, who in it gave one of the most magnificent and sustained performances of our day, prefers *Eden End*. Now I grant the charm of *Eden End*. As Scott said of *The Antiquary*, it has a sort of salvation about it. But in scale, ambition, and grandeur of effect, it is not comparable with *Johnson Over Jordan*.

However that may be, of Mr. Priestley's last three plays, the reader of this book will find that I have been really pleased

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only with *An Inspector Calls*. This does not seem to anger Mr. Priestley's friends (except in Bournemouth) so much as it grieves and even puzzles them. If I have seen these plays and failed to appreciate them, is it possible I did not quite understand? Such appears to be their attitude. Ah well, pearls must find their proper audience before justice can be done.

Of our leading authors' publics, I find the least sensitive to be Mr. Noel Coward's. Mr. Coward's friends take what is coming to them, and say nothing about it. Of course, there are alarming possibilities. Perhaps they don't read me. If they do, perhaps they don't trouble themselves over what I say. Perhaps they are overcareful about postage. But I prefer to think that, when I write of *Peace in Our Time*, and especially of *Point Valaine*, they keep a stiff upper lip, and hope I shall soon be in a better temper.

Our principal dramatists have not, I think, been in their best form lately. Mr. St. John Ervine, in *Private Enterprise*, fought with immense spirit, but, in my opinion, hit below the belt when he could have achieved victory by means perfectly fair. Mr. Emlyn Williams, in *Trespass*, took the view that occultism is best left alone; a doctrine he might profitably have practised by not writing this play. In spite of these disappointments, the theatre, in the period under review, has financially prospered. The automatic wealth of the war years has gone; but a good entertainment, of almost any kind, more often than not still packs the playhouse. There have been one or two exceptions to this optimistic rule, notably *Angel*. *Angel* was a rather ramshackle play, but Miss Joyce Redman gave in it a remarkable performance; and it brought back to the London stage Mr. Alan Webb, one of our best young (or youngish) actors, though hardly in his highest form. But, in the main, the worth while pieces have prospered.

The most sensational example of this, of course, is *Oklahoma!* During the 1914-18 war and after, *Chu Chin Chow* had a record run of 2,238 performances at His Majesty's. It played altogether to £700,000, the average receipts at each performance being £312. Now, including entertainment tax and library discount, *Oklahoma!* drew nearly half as much as *Chu Chin Chow* in one-seventh the number of performances, with average

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receipts three times as high, though, of course, at somewhat increased prices.

It is not, however, only first-class musicals that have prospered. *Edward, My Son*, a straight play, has taken at the box-office at one performance half as much again as the average receipts of *Chu Chin Chow*. The success of the revival of Shaw's *You Never Can Tell* is equally striking. Henry Sherek presented it at Wyndham's, whose longest run was *Quiet Week-end*. *Quiet Week-end*, running for over a thousand performances, took £187,000. Its average receipts were £164. The average receipts of *You Never Can Tell*, up to its hundredth performance, were £280. These figures do not include, of course, any statistics for the last weeks or months of the more recent productions. It is inevitable that such statistics would show less favourable results. Nevertheless, the success of *Oklahoma!*, *You Never Can Tell*, and *Edward, My Son* is very remarkable. It shows that, whatever else it is doing, the theatre is not losing its audiences.

It used to be feared that the cinema would take away the theatre's public. In the dreary days of the 1920's and 1930's, when theatres were being turned into cinemas all over the country, when the Alhambra became the Odeon, and Daly's Warner's, the fear seemed well founded. But for the moment, at any rate, it has been dissipated.

What the cinema does to the theatre is not to remove its audiences (it may even occasionally increase them, for I am certain that many of the occupants of the gallery at the first night of *You Never Can Tell* were more cinema- than theatre-minded); but it does unfortunately take away many of the theatre's players. This is especially true of the theatre's younger actors and actresses. Easily could I linger out a purposed overcall of the names of young men and women who, after one considerable success upon the stage, have vanished into the world of celluloid. At the annual matinée of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in 1942, the Bancroft Gold Medal was won, if I remember rightly, by a stoutish young gentleman of some degree of stage magnetism, of whom nothing has since been heard. The second or third prize on that occasion was carried off by a youth of nineteen who had no particular natural advantages (he was not very tall,

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was only reasonably good-looking, his voice had no great power or beauty, and he was educated at Wyggeston Grammar School). But he had energy, concentration, and ambition. Soon one found his fresh, rather boyish face appearing in most of the smaller and outlying theatres: at Kew, at the Arts, in Cambridge. Then, at the Garrick, in 1943, though still handicapped by lack of height (he seemed always to be restraining himself from standing on tiptoe), he gave a performance of considerable tension as the young gangster-hero of *Brighton Rock*. This performance made him a marked man. Later in 1943 he joined the R.A.F., and in February of the next year was seconded to the R.A.F. Film Unit. Since he was demobilized Richard Attenborough has not once appeared on the London stage; but he is known all the world over as a rising (even a risen) star of British films.

Much the same road has been travelled by Peggy Cummins since she was so successful as Fuffy Adams in *Junior Miss* at the Saville in 1943. I have not seen her since on the stage; but after a first night in St. Martin's Lane in the autumn of 1947—she had been in the audience—I caught a glimpse of her swathed in furs and wraps, sinking into the back seat of a huge car, which was surrounded by crowds of youths and girls clamouring for autographs. After the first night of *The Chiltern Hundreds* Rex Harrison made his way through a similar crowd of adorers to a car even larger and more opulent; that is the nearest I have seen him to the stage since he played Gaylord Easterbrook in *No Time for Comedy* in 1941. But the list of players whom the films have taken wholly or partly from the theatre is almost endless. In many ways the standard achieved by the London theatre to-day is remarkably high. But one cannot help feeling that it would be much higher even than it is if the theatre, in the last twenty years, had been able to make exclusive use of the talents of such people as Robert Donat, Michael Redgrave, Laurence Olivier, Cedric Hardwicke, and Ralph Richardson.

This is a fact which is recognized by all dramatic critics. It might therefore be expected that when a distinguished screen actor returns to the stage that fostered him, there would be considerable rejoicing, praise, and welcome. Sir Ralph Richardson and Sir Laurence Olivier have found such welcome awaiting

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them. But there have been other cases not so happy; and Mr. Redgrave and Mr. Donat in particular might well inquire why, if they are so much wanted back in the theatre, when they come, the door is heartily slammed in their faces. It is difficult to find a satisfactory answer, beyond the fact that that is the illogical way in which the world rumbles along. It remains true that the theatre is immensely enriched by their presence, whatever may have been said about their Benedick or their Macbeth.

The influence of the cinema on the theatre in London is not so great as the influence of Hollywood on Broadway. It is possible to act in Denham in the afternoon and the West End at night. But you cannot in an hour's motor run reach New York from California. The New York stage is consequently being more vigorously despoiled even than the British. Another advantage that the London stage, in a commercial sense, enjoys over the American, is the fact that its audiences are far less ruthless. *The Voice of the Turtle* was presented in London by an American management, which was accustomed to the American way of doing things. America believes that a thing either is or is not. It is a success or it is a failure. This attitude of mind is a natural response to the temper of American audiences. The play's cost of production here was £6,000, and its total receipts at the box-office were £13,700. Its record takings for one performance were £382. These figures would have induced almost any English management to continue the play's run. But it was brought off after sixty-one performances.

To cast one's eye over a list of productions and their runs in New York in the recent past is an alarming experience. *Second Best Bed*, with Ruth Chatterton, lasted for eight performances; *The Dancer*, a murder mystery with Colin Keith-Johnston, once in London a Hamlet in modern dress, and playing in this production with an extraordinarily fine crease in his trousers, came off after five; *Hidden Horizon*, which was presented here as *Murder on the Nile*, played twelve times; *Obsession*, a two-player psychological drama with Basil Rathbone and Eugenie Leontovich, managed to survive thirty-one representations, but *Hear That Trumpet*, a comedy-drama about a jazz band, endured only eight; *Mr. Peebles and Mr. Hooker*,



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a fantasy folk drama with religious overtones, lasted only four; and *A Family Affair*, a domestic comedy, five. These plays were presented within a space of a few months. The London theatre can show no such figures of relentless slaughter.

Recent successes in New York, like their counterparts in London, have included several revivals, such as Victor Herbert's *Sweethearts*, and the Broadway melodrama, *Burlesque*. But they have included also some interesting serious dramas. Maxwell Anderson's *Joan of Lorraine*, with Ingrid Bergman, ran for 198 performances, and Lillian Hellman's *Another Part of the Forest*, dealing with some of the characters of *The Little Foxes* at an earlier stage of their lives, for 182; there was also Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*. Which of London's productions, in the period covered by this book, belong to the same class as these three plays?

Mr. Priestley's *The Linden Tree*, certainly; perhaps also Mr. Travers Otway's *The Hidden Years*; undoubtedly Mr. William Douglas Home's *Now Barabbas* . . . ; but it is not easy to prolong the list. Plenty of very good serious work has been done in the London theatre recently; but it has been done mainly by players and producers. We have had a magnificent *Lear*, an interesting experimental *Macbeth*, a very good *White Devil*, an excellent *Richard II*, a good *Saint Joan*, and, in *The Relapse*, the best restoration of the Restoration stage I have ever seen. It is, I think, better even than Mr. John Gielgud's famous revival of *Love for Love* at the Phoenix in 1943, which ran for 441 performances. It has greater vigour, more drive and attack, than that lovely production, and it is better balanced, in that no actor is exceeded by his part, and no part by its actor. In *Love for Love* the latter happened, for Valentine employs only a tithe of Mr. Gielgud's talents. There is, then, plenty of serious work being done in London; but our contemporary dramatists are not as yet taking their full share of it.

Their ranks have been augmented by three new writers of promise. Of these, Mr. William Douglas Home, the author of *Now Barabbas* . . . and *The Chiltern Hundreds*, has been the most successful; but Mr. Otway, and Mr. Wynyard Browne, whose *Dark Summer* was played at Hammersmith, are both men to be watched.

It was, however, in the sphere of musicals that the year's

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main achievement is to be found. Some of the musical shows produced in London were indeed abysmally feeble; than *The Red Mill* and *The Birdseller* few more blighted entertainments can ever have struck the town. But Sir Charles Cochran's and Sir Alan Herbert's *Bless the Bride* showed English musical comedy at its best and its most gracious; and the American *Oklahoma!*, which restored prosperity to Drury Lane, was a revelation of what can be done by hair-trigger efficiency directed by a true artistic conception.

Equally financially successful was the production of another American musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*. But, compared with *Oklahoma!* and *Bless the Bride*, the presentation of *Annie* showed a sad decline of taste. It was put on with second-rate scenery, and second-rate supporting players. But for its leading lady, Dolores Gray, it would, I think, have trodden hard on the heels of *The Birdseller* in the race to annihilation. Miss Gray, however, saved it.

There have been other shows worthy of brief remembrance. The Irish macabre comedy, *Happy as Larry*, and the big-scale melodrama, *Edward, My Son*; among the light comedies, *Off the Record*; and Mr. Ben Travers's triumphant farce, *Outrageous Fortune*—all these had merit.

I have spoken of Miss Gray's services to *Annie Get Your Gun*. Miss Gray is a very young actress, and has never been seen before in London. In fact, she has scarcely been seen before anywhere. Whether she is an actress of variety and resource, whether she has stamina, yet remains to be proved. An actor is not a very good actor until, in addition to producing a big effect, he goes on producing big effects for a considerable period of time. Nevertheless, it is something to produce a big effect even once. Many players go through long careers without ever doing it. Miss Gray therefore is entitled to feel very satisfied. There have been other players, too, young players who, for a moment or longer, have stood out from the rest of the company—Mr. Brian Reece, Mr. Richard Longman: but their names are to be found recorded elsewhere.

I wish them all prosperity; and I hope they will bring prosperity to the theatre.

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## INTRODUCTION

ON Friday, July 11, 1947, over lunch at the Reform Club, Mr. Hadley offered me the job of dramatic critic to the *Sunday Times* in succession to James Agate, who died late on Friday evening, June 6. I had seen Jimmie the night before he died. Leonard Russell and his wife, Dilys Powell, and I called in about half-past six at his gloomy and curio-crammed flat in Grape Street. We had told him we were coming, but when we arrived we were surprised and a little touched to find that he was treating our casual visit as a small party. Grace Chenhalls presided over two little tables of appetizing kickshaws. There was a bottle of champagne for Dilys and Leonard, and, in deference to my prejudices, a bottle of barley water.

Jimmie was in quiet but cheerful spirits. He looked better than I had seen him for a long time. He went back, in a temper of subdued but happy ribaldry, to the distant days of his youth: recalled the first time he drank strong liquor, and his first experience of women, mixing his reminiscences with the memory of a black girl once famous on the music-hall stage. I left after a short while to see Leslie Banks and Sophie Stewart in *Life with Father*. Jimmie came out into the dark hall to shake hands with me. I expected that in a short while he would be back at his old first-night post at the end of the third row of stalls.

It is now more than twenty years ago that, an undergraduate at Oxford reading one of Agate's earliest articles in the *Sunday Times*, I realized that there was in this country a contemporary dramatic critic comparable with Hazlitt.

It is only twenty months since I came to know Jimmie Agate in person as well as in his writing; but that time was long enough to recognize that, besides being as brilliant as Hazlitt, he was as kind, as generous, as courageous and as gay as Hazlitt's contemporary, Lamb. And that, beneath, and enriching, his abundant joy in the good things of life—in hackney

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ponies, in high living, in witty conversation, in the zest of friendship, in amusing stories, in cricket, and in expensive bric-à-brac—there was that fundamental seriousness of outlook without which solid and durable writing is impossible.

His gaiety was never dimmed. In the early spring I ran into him at lunch at the Ivy. "Have a drink," he called out to me across two or three tables. "I never drink," I replied. "Oh, no, of course not," he said. Then, fixing on me a gaze of intense solemnity, he shouted in his most authoritative tones, "Waiter, fetch Harold Hobson half a cabbage."

That was the light-hearted, happy, idiosyncratic side of his nature. Lunching with him during April I saw another that is less well known. He asked me which were my favourite lines in English poetry, and told me that his own were either in Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*, or those by Matthew Arnold:

So have I heard the cuckoo's parting cry,  
From the wet field, through the vext garden-trees,  
Come with the volleying rain and tossing breeze:  
"The bloom is gone, and with the bloom go I."

"There are better things than that in the Bible," I said. Jimmie looked at me closely, and under his breath repeated, "Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of Heaven." He was silent for a few moments, thinking back over his Unitarian youth in Manchester long ago. "Yes," he said, almost as if talking to himself, "that is superb. But you shouldn't quote it casually just over a restaurant table."

His was a crowded life. Through it all—his years in the cotton trade, on the Manchester *Daily Dispatch*, and then the *Manchester Guardian*, in his tobacconist's shop, in the army in the 1914–18 war (characteristically, Valentine Heywood reminds me, he claimed, as a remount officer in Provence, to be the British soldier furthest from the fighting)—flamed his love for the theatre. Whatever he wrote about it, he wrote with all his might. Out of his great output he was especially proud of three things: his biography, *Rachel*, his volumes of *Ego* (to the last of which he was making a final addition only the

Thursday morning before he died), and his work on the *Sunday Times*.

In my opinion it is upon this last that Agate's enduring fame will rest. He was the dramatic critic of the *Sunday Times* for nearly a quarter of a century; and I read him always with admiration and envious despair. He saw, during this period, several thousand plays, and wrote over 1,200 articles. Nearly all have been collected and republished. They form the only connected account of the English stage from 1923 onwards. They take their place with Hazlitt, Lewes, Henry Morley, Knight, Shaw, Walkley and Beerbohm, and they will be read as long as the English theatre survives, either in fact or as a memory.

They are compact with noble qualities: with enthusiasm, with knowledge, with life. But their essence to me is this: any competent critic can discuss a play, but Agate could perpetuate a player. That is a far harder thing to do. The one can be accomplished by any skilful scholar: to do the other requires the creative artist. The great players of our time—the Edith Evanses, the Lilian Braithwaites, the Richardsons, the Oliviers, the Gielguds, the Thorndikes—owe their contemporary eminence to their own splendid talents. But it is by the grace of James Agate that they will be remembered down the years.





# SEPTEMBER 1946

THE first time I deputized for James Agate in the *Sunday Times* was when he was on holiday in the summer of 1945, but it was not until September 1946 that I began to do so as a regular thing. His health had now become precarious, and he refused to take orders, go to bed early, and live according to the book of arithmetic. More and more was I seen at first nights in his place.

On September 14, 1946, therefore, I attended the first performance of Cocteau's *The Eagle Has Two Heads*, at the Lyric, Hammersmith. Not many first-night audiences have been more taken by surprise than that which gathered for this occasion. Expectation was pitched high for some new, soon-to-be-fashionable experiment in technique, for a fantastic allegory of the human comedy. Instead of which the nineteenth century was wiped out as if it had never been, as though Ibsen and realism were words that had no meaning, and we were given a story of a white-robed queen, in love with bats and storms and mouldering ancient castles, who, in a passionate ecstasy, and in speeches the like of which for length the English stage has rarely, if ever, heard, persuades a revolutionary poet to assassinate her. But for the lack of poetry, this was Hugo and the Romantic Movement all over again.

In this play M. Cocteau uses all the apparatus of melodrama. His characters are either royalty or peasants, either queens or the poetic murderers of queens, they are Dukes of Willenstein or Ediths de Berçg, chiefs of police or the ghosts of kings. In a vast room lit by eighteen tall candles, which cast a flickering golden glow upon brocaded hangings, a white and glittering queen, whose face has never been seen by her people since the

assassination of her husband ten years before, taunts her lady-in-waiting, Edith de Berg, for her terror at the storm that is howling round the castle chimneys, or flings wide the window that looks down upon the thick and ivied walls, crying aloud her kinship with the lightning, and answering each roll of thunder with wild triumphant boasts.

*M. Cocteau, it will be readily appreciated, has the courage of his bombast, and he sets his queen to entertain to dinner, and to play cards with, her slaughtered husband, with as little hesitation as any other dramatist would give one of his characters a cup of tea. The king, of course, is not there: the queen speaks only to vacant air: she deals the cards for an emptiness and a void: she speaks to nothing, and apostrophizes a cipher; until, with a most especial crack of thunder, the curtains at the great window belly into the room, the blood-stained figure of the king crashes out of the darkness on to the floor, the lady shrieks, and for a moment we think we are back with Horace Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe.*

It is not, of course, the king her husband who has returned to life. It is only that comparatively mundane character, a poet who has come to murder the queen, and acquired a few bruises in the preliminary processes of his political activity. The idea of assassination appeals to the queen—who is a remarkable woman—and, encouraged by having at last obtained a real and palpable audience, she plunges into fresh tides of rhetoric with redoubled energy and enthusiasm.

The speech which the queen here delivers is of stupendous length. On the first night the stalls, circle and gallery were held in fascinated admiration as Miss Eileen Herlie stormed and raged, cajoled and pleaded, defied and adjured, apostrophized and recited. The words tumbled out in an apparently endless stream, they roared and rushed, now they thundered in deep and angry majesty, now they soared high in lyric splendour, according to the modulations of Miss Herlie's voice. It was a feat of extraordinary physical endurance, and as such cannot be too highly praised. My friend Nora Taylor saw the second performance, and I asked her to time this speech for me. She found that it lasted twenty-one minutes by her watch.

Miss Herlie's performance has stirred many of my fellow critics to their depths. She is now out of the ordinary columns of dramatic criticism, and among the headlines of the news. One cutting that lies before me, running across three columns of a London daily paper, declares that "When the curtain fell everyone in the house knew she had . . . stepped into the triumphant light that sheds on to the front row of her profession." Well, all this is very nice, and I congratulate Miss Herlie on her success. But my own admiration for her is due chiefly to her remarkable technical accomplishment. For hers is a performance of remarkable stamina.

It was one of the most sensational successes I have seen in the theatre. A young Scots woman of twenty-eight years of age, whose recreations are music and reading, Miss Herlie had first appeared in London at the Ambassadors on Boxing Day, 1942, as Mrs. de Winter in *Rebecca*, without, so far as I remember, attracting much attention. After a season of touring and at the Liverpool Playhouse, Miss Herlie came to the Lyric, Hammersmith, and gave several performances of merit. But it was on this almost seventh anniversary of the outbreak of war that she irrupted with violence and *r  clame* into the small circle of stars. After the performance she sat in her dressing-room, weeping with excitement at the congratulations of her friends, and with the thunder of the audience's applause still ringing in her ears. She had come to London at the end of 1941 with £35 in her pocket; now the West End and the film studios seemed within her reach. A few minutes before the curtain rose she had looked into her small table mirror, and was horrified to find it broken. This had happened on the journey from Edinburgh to London. She put it aside, and walked on to the stage—a bright vision tall and stately in a long trailing white dress entering into a cavernous gloom—clutching a coin with a double eagle's head, and a heather horseshoe from Scotland.

My colleagues greatly praised her: and the gossip writers everywhere reached out for superlatives.

I find, however, that I did not join the general chorus of congratulation. Shortly afterwards I remarked: "Last week I said that Miss Herlie, who is playing the queen in *The Eagle*

*Has Two Heads* at the Lyric, Hammersmith, gives a performance of 'remarkable stamina'. On Tuesday afternoon I met a red-faced man who looked me right in the eye, and said, 'Prove it!'

I proceeded to do so. And I did this with the greater pleasure because, though Miss Herlie had been enormously praised, she was, I think, praised for the wrong thing, whilst the unique, stupendous achievement that ought to have made her performance remembered in theatrical history passed almost unnoticed.

M. Cocteau's play, as I have said, is a romantic taradiddle about a white-gowned, night-gowned, sylph-like queen who wishes to cease upon the midday with no pain by the dagger of a revolutionary poet. It is a piece of eloquent nonsense, and its chief interest is that it presents to the player of the queen a task of immense technical difficulty. For when the revolutionary poet makes his appearance on the stage he does so by tumbling through a castle window in a storm at a moment when the queen is engaged on a speech which she does not permit the intruder to interrupt. This speech contains 2,882 words—I have had them carefully counted: 618 before the murderer enters, and 2,264 while he is lying on the floor. It is, so far as is known, the longest speech ever delivered on any stage.

I then made a few comparisons. The French call a long, dull speech a *récit de Thérémène*, after an original which the greatest English authority on the French theatre tells me contains roughly 600 words. In the first production of *Saint Joan*, O. B. Clarence was warmly commended for getting through the speech of the Inquisitor. This has about 1,200 words. Sir Gerald du Maurier once said that the most difficult thing he ever had to do on the stage was to give Pantaloon's opening address in Barrie's play of that name. This is about as long as the speech of the Inquisitor.

Now, of these speeches, famous or notorious for their length, one is less than a quarter of that which Miss Herlie delivers in *The Eagle Has Two Heads*: and the other two are considerably less than half. But this isn't all: add the three together and even then they very little exceed the total number

of words Miss Herlie is called upon to speak without interruption or assistance from her colleagues.

For twenty-one consecutive minutes the flow of words from her lips is punctuated only by her own pauses and by peals of off-stage thunder. It is a tremendous feat. I think of the music-hall artist handcuffed in the tank of water; I think of the *triple-century Test-match innings*; I think of this speech: and henceforth my symbols of endurance more than human are Houdini, Hutton, and Herlie. To deliver a speech like this, with constant variation of pace and strength, without flagging or fuzziness, is a great strain on the throat, voice, muscles, larynx: and it places Miss Herlie among, if not the great actresses, at least the notable athletes. With respect and admiration I salute her.

But though she discharges her task with energy, intelligence, and spirit, she did not once move me, except, perhaps, in her scream at the assassin's entrance. Yet I am not difficult to stir. Mr. Robert Douglas's just and generous, but not affectionate, husband in the new Lonsdale play touches me: and the ashamed tenderness of Mr. Walter Crisham's harsh farewell to London at the Garrick: and Mr. John Gielgud's sudden surrendering confession at the end of *Crime and Punishment*: and Mr. Harry Gordon's singing of a chorus from "My Old Dutch" at the King's Theatre, Glasgow: these and several other things now upon the stage. But not Miss Herlie. Not at any rate, yet.

This view did not at all satisfy Miss Herlie's admirers, and many of them leapt to her defence. If, said one eloquent letter, all I needed to be convinced that she was a great actress was that I should be moved by her, then it was a great pity I had not seen her in some other part. In *Peg o' My Heart*, *Rebecca*, *The Watch on the Rhine*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Brontës* she would have made me spend the entire evening in a positive flood of tears. But in *The Eagle Has Two Heads*, it was maintained, Miss Herlie pandered neither to sentiment nor sentimentality. Yet to imagine that Miss Herlie cannot move an audience is like "believing that to-morrow's dawn won't break or the evening twilight fade."

This was beautifully, if warmly, put; but it did not—no, it did not—move me. One can be moved to many things besides

tears: to anger, to excitement, to disgust, to despair, even to agreement. My real objection to Miss Herlie's performance was not that it did not move me to tears, but that, except intellectually and in a detached sort of way, it did not move me to anything else.

5, THURSDAY. Saw Frederick Lonsdale's *But For the Grace of God*, produced at the St. James's two nights ago. Throughout the performance I was puzzled to explain why I was not enjoying it more than I did. It is a common complaint against the English theatre that, in days fraught with events determining the destiny of mankind, it fritters itself away on teacup persiflage. Its reply to the atom bomb is a monster revue; to the Iron Curtain, a platinum blonde.

With these criticisms I have from time to time associated myself. After rolling in the aisles with laughter at Leslie Henson or Jack Hulbert, I have, on reaching home, remarked to Elizabeth, "But what we really need, my dear, is a Serious Play, a play that has Something to Say."

All things come to him who waits, and lately the serious plays have come to me. In the last few weeks I have seen plays that have had Something to Say about strikes, slum property, the moral and physical ruin of war, and the philosophy of revolution. I should hate to feel that intellectually I can't take it. I still protest that I prefer Serious Plays. I should like to see another—say the week after next. Meanwhile, I begin to perceive that frivolity also has its function.

Therefore, I repeat, I am surprised that *But for the Grace of God* didn't seem quite as funny as it might have been. After bomb craters, and Dublin tenement houses, the drawing-room of a Scottish mansion, with thick carpets, flowers and comfortable armchairs (not a beetle in the place) fell gratefully upon my eye. (I was glad to observe that in Scotland at midday it is warm enough to stroll round the garden—three weeks in Argyll this summer had left me in some doubt on the point.) After long rhetorical speeches, eloquent but fatiguing, Mr. Lonsdale's terse and epigrammatic wit was very welcome. No one loves a peen of the realm as much as Mr. Lonsdale does; and no one can make him look such an engaging ass.

Deep in his heart Mr. Lonsdale evidently has a great affection for those who possess money—lots of it; and with what sublime fatuity he makes that money talk!

All this is very agreeable. What, then, is the secret of the comparative misfire? It is, I think, that Mr. Lonsdale writes from a double standpoint. His plot is simple. A young naval officer (Robert Douglas) is returning to his wife and father after several years' service abroad. As he arrives, an American, who has made great friends with the Englishman's family, is going back to the United States. The American (Hugh McDermott) has had a fleeting affair with the wife, and this has been discovered by the black sheep of the family, a degenerate played by Michael Gough (an actor new to me) with a long-lipped sneering smile that is wonderfully effective. Trying blackmail, this fellow is killed by the indignant American after a rousing fight in which the furniture is not worth ten seconds' purchase.

This is not a particularly clever or original story, yet, if straightforwardly told, it would do as well as another. But it isn't. Mr. Lonsdale has one rule for the people he likes, and another for those he doesn't like. Most moralities in the past have condemned adultery, but because Mr. Lonsdale likes his American and his heroine, he regards it here with a beaming and benevolent eye.

Most moralities condemn blackmail, too, and, Mr. Lonsdale's attitude in other matters being what it is, I expected him to look on that also with an amused tolerance. But I was wrong. Throughout he treats the blackmailer with fierce indignation, and his other characters, with his full approval, hurl stones without the slightest regard for their own glass houses. This is disconcerting and puzzling. Mr. Lonsdale should make up his mind about what his moral attitude is going to be, and when he has done so, he should stick to it. Otherwise, he merely wraps his audience in confusion. It is ridiculous and annoying to have one foot on a paradox if you are going firmly to plant the other on a platitude.

In the fight in this play it was not merely the furniture that got broken. During the run of the piece Hugh McDermott broke three of Michael Gough's ribs and injured the base of

his spine. He himself had a fractured wrist, a cut behind the ear, a black eye, and a broken finger. In the pre-London tour, in one performance at Newcastle, Mr. McDermott cut Mr. Gough's lip, and held him up by the collar so that the audience could see the blood pouring from his mouth. These nightly encounters were among the most lifelike fights ever seen on the London stage, and they became so fierce that the management later engaged Ernie Rice, ex-British lightweight champion, and Vince Hawkins, contender for the British middle-weight championship, to give Messrs. Gough and McDermott lessons in how to throw each other about without injury.

The play was further notable for bringing Mr. Robert Douglas back to the London theatre for the first time after his six years' service in the Fleet Air Arm. Appearing as a lieutenant-commander, Mr. Douglas wore on the stage his own uniform, with alterations to two buttons, to conform with the Lord Chamberlain's regulations. Near the end of the run Mr. Douglas was given by Warner Brothers what is said to be the highest contract ever offered by that firm to an actor engaged outside the United States. It is alleged to begin at £350 a week, rising to £1,600 and will run for seven years. It means, of course, that Mr. Douglas will be lost to the West End for a long time.

ALAN DENT. An enjoyable melodrama (*News Chronicle*).

After seeing *But for the Grace of God* I dined at the Ivy with Elizabeth (my usual meal: melon, roast duckling, ice with fruit salad, coffee). When we were half-finished, William Wordsworth (the only descendant of the poet, I believe, not born in the Lake Country), came in, accompanied by Ivor Novello, Alan Dent, and one or two others. They sat in the far left-hand corner of the restaurant, at the table usually occupied by Herbert Smith, managing director of Keith Prowse, after first nights. What they had met to discuss came out shortly afterwards. They propose to offer each year an award for the best new play and the best acting performance. The awards are given by Anthony Hawtrey, manager of the Embassy Theatre, and are to be known as Embassy Theatre Awards. These will be the only prizes given in the British



theatre, and they will not be tainted with money. The most delicate susceptibilities will hardly be affronted by the offer of a small replica of an original statuette in silver, to be permanently on view at the Embassy Theatre, Swiss Cottage. The adjudicating committee is to consist of Mr. Novello, Sir Edward Marsh, Miss Hester Chapman, the novelist, and Mr. Leslie Bloom, for twenty-one years president of the Gallery First Nighters' Club. The English stage will now have its Oscar: and every player who doesn't get one will no doubt be wild.

9, MONDAY. *The Merchant of Venice* at the New Yiddish Theatre. This production, the first literal translation of the play into Yiddish, is notable for the guttural passion and power of Mr. Meier Zelniker's Shylock. To those acquainted with Mr. Zelniker's gifts as a low comedian, casting him as Shylock might seem like entrusting Hamlet to Little Tich: but the experiment is an entire success.

10, TUESDAY. *The Constant Wife*, at the Arts. Men philander: then why not women? Because married ladies aren't economically independent. That is why Mr. Maugham's heroine earns £1,500 before throwing her bonnet over the Italian mountains. This engaging little play is presented by a company that includes Miss Marjorie Stewart, Mr. Wyndham Goldie, a moderate sense of wit, and the most surprising collection of high-falutin' accents in London.

11, WEDNESDAY. *The Skin of Our Teeth*, at the Piccadilly Theatre. It's only the play that is high-falutin' here: but it is a good play, even a brilliant, all the same. If I contradict myself, very well, I contradict myself. Miss Vivien Leigh's Sabina was greatly praised last year: it is as enchanting, as stimulating, as saucy, as disturbing as ever. She is equally the reason why poems get written, and lives wrecked.

12, THURSDAY. *Mother of Men*, at the Comedy Theatre. The Widow Brant has three tall sons, a fisherman's cottage, and the family pride of the Vere de Veres. ~~She~~ <sup>He</sup> is shaken somewhat

by the arrival in her Devonshire village of a London "hussy" who likes going to the pictures, and is even not averse to flirting with two eligible bachelors at the same time. But Miss Barbara Mullen's homely humour and rugged poise eventually produce the rabbit of matrimonial bliss out of the hat of distressed courtships. The trick has been performed before, and with greater subtlety. For this is a simple-hearted play; Parson Adams, inspired by a Sunday-school treat, might have written it for the Band of Hope. There is, by the way, a heartrending little performance of a wronged girl by Miss Helen Franklyn, an actress new to me.

16, MONDAY. *The Love Lottery*, at the Twentieth Century Theatre. There have been no recent changes in the West End, except that *This Way to the Tomb*, already well known through its long run at the Mercury, has come to the Garrick for matinées. In consequence, dramatic critics, exploring far from their usual haunts, have been seen, compass and guide-book in hand, thrusting beyond Paddington Station, and into the further fastnesses of Kew. They have indeed gone further: and they cannot complain if they have fared worse.

At the Twentieth Century Theatre in Westbourne Grove Mr. Ralph Lynn has produced a new farcical comedy bearing the title of *The Love Lottery*. This theatre, which is charmingly decorated in blue, is about the size of the crush-hall at Drury Lane; it used to be called the Bijou. But, if Gilbert White referred to the minute undulations of the South Downs as "that chain of majestic mountains," it would be ungracious to cavil at the Bijou's present somewhat more pretentious title.

Let us take gratefully what we are given, including a one-man orchestra, which does wonders with a piano, a violin, a saxophone, and a cup of coffee. (The coffee, I believe, is there for dramatic effect; at any rate, to-night it remained undisturbed on top of the piano throughout the entire evening.)

At the end of the proceedings Mr. Lynn, after a hurried journey from his own admirable *Is Your Honeymoon Really Necessary?* at the Duke of York's, appeared, and, with monocle and cigar, proceeded to make a speech. He started by remarking that there were twice as many people in the theatre as he

had expected, which seemed a rather macabre note to strike. But after that he had some excellent fun with a dilatory press photographer in the audience. Time and again Mr. Lynn fell into an attitude of unstudied but dignified ease. Yet somehow the photographer never seemed quite ready to click the camera or snap the shutter or whatever it is that photographers do.

But here I must interrupt myself. For I can feel a sense of impatience rising among readers of this diary. Instead of chattering on, I can hear them asking, Why doesn't he tell us something about the play? Why doesn't he cut the cackle and get to the 'osses?

But ah, my friends, what if the 'osses are spavined? What if, like Petruchio's steed, they are troubled with the lampass? Suppose they are stark spoiled with the staggers and swayed in the back? In such circumstances, it is surely only human, it is even kind-hearted, to procrastinate a little. For I cannot deny that *The Love Lottery* is a lottery that has no prizes.

It is run by an impecunious group of people in the holiday resort of Roseville in the Republic of Floradinia. Among them is a film star whom it is decided to raffle off in marriage. There is also a monkey who steals a lot of money which has already been stolen by one of the lottery-runners. Finally, the woman who wins the lottery dies, and the film star marries the heroine. He has, by the way, already been married to her before.

That is the play's plot. You would like an example of its wit? One of the characters says, "I must elevate my hosiery." He means—well, work it out for yourselves. Why is it called a farce? Because one of the characters—not the same one: the jam is evenly divided—takes off his trousers. Before he can complete the operation the curtain comes down. I imagine it is this touch of refinement that makes it also a comedy.

The company, I thought, did not ill match the play. But they are young, and Mrs. Siddons bound no spells when she first appeared in London.

Reduced by *The Love Lottery* to a state of anxious misery, I went later to the Coliseum to see Milton's *Comus*, which had received more attention from authorities on ballet than from dramatic critics. Immediately upon the rising of the curtain, so soon as I saw the ancient classicized figure of what I took

to be the Recording Angel seated in a Greek temple high above the clouds, writing down upon his tablets with majestic ease every movement of the glittering, dancing maidens below, I was at once reminded of the opening of the Lunts' production of *Amphitryon* 38, and also transported out of that mood of gnawing sorrow into which recent theatre-going experiences had plunged me, into a temper of anticipatory ecstasy which the subsequent performances of Mr. Leslie French and Mr. Antony Eustrel rendered full, complete and entirely satisfying.

Mr. French is perhaps chubby for so ethereal a being as an Attendant Spirit; and I thought I detected now and again in Mr. Eustrel's speech a slight suspicion of a suggestion of a tinge of a rural accent (though I may be wrong here). But in what clear musical tones does Mr. French speak his enchanting lines, and how he can make his whole being leap out—snatch as it were, at a fleeting beauty skimming past us—when he flings up his arm to catch "the sparkle of a glancing star"! And with what dark majesty relieved, adorned and freshened by a Satanic playfulness does Mr. Eustrel invest his black and supple Comus!

19, THURSDAY. *The Bells Ring*, at the Q Theatre. This is an agreeably preposterous play about a provincial general practitioner who apparently interviews his panel patients dressed like a West End surgeon going into the operating theatre. Though the title of the piece might well be *Kisses in the Consulting-room* or *Embraces over the Embrocation*, the author, Joyce Dennys, introduces a good deal of surprisingly serious discussion about the new national health service, slum property, and personal freedom. Mr. John Stuart, as the doctor in the provinces, looks like a provincial doctor (despite his costume); Miss Gladys Boot, as his wife, looks like a provincial doctor's wife; and Miss Eileen Peel, as the lady who makes the provincial doctor's heart beat faster, looks like Miss Diana Wynyard. This may not be realistic, but it is undeniably pleasant.

24, TUESDAY. *King Lear*, at the New Theatre. The return of the Old Vic Company to the New Theatre with three new

productions, *Lear*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and a new play by J. B. Priestley called *An Inspector Calls*, is undoubtedly the biggest theatrical event of the year. Though many people who remember the Old Vic when it inhabited its now bombed premises in the Waterloo Road, and presented Shakespeare at cheap prices, resent its translation to the West End, with evening dress in the stalls and seats at 13s. 6d. each, it cannot be denied that in the last few months, with Ralph Richardson and Laurence Olivier as its leading players, its prestige has enormously increased. The public interest in it is tremendous. Booking for this season began three weeks ago. Seventeen hours before the box-office opened at ten o'clock in the morning of September 1, nine enthusiasts were standing in line in order to pounce on the best seats for the three first-night performances, only to find that these seats can be booked only by letter. The first two people in the queue were young girls—fifteen-year-old Julia Horne of Sudbury, and Brenda Shepherd, one year younger, also of Sudbury. When the box-office opened the queue had increased to about two hundred, many of whom had been there all night. They had brought with them blankets, biscuits, spirit stoves, deck-chairs, tea-kettles, and gramophones. One youth, who was walking up and down memorizing a speech from *Saint Joan*, said they had had a good time.

Thirty-six hours before the curtain rose on *Lear*, the queues began all over again, but this time for the cheaper seats. Mr. Olivier slipped into the theatre at two in the afternoon without being noticed, and rehearsed until teatime, when he ate what is termed a light meal of chicken and potatoes. So do great men prepare for their ordeals.

The curtain went up in an atmosphere of expectation. Immediately Mr. Olivier came on he reminded me of what I had read of Irving. Irving took great pains with the opening of *Lear*. Those who saw him record that, coming down a flight of steps, he leaned on a huge scabbarded sword which he raised with a "wild cry in answer to the shouted greetings of the guards." He began Shakespeare's most far-ranging play, a vast symbol of the world's anguish, the cruelty of men and women, and the unpitying strength and indifference of the

universe, in noise and tumult and barbaric war. I regret I never saw Irving. It must have been a very fine opening.

But I cannot believe that it was finer than Mr. Olivier's. Mr. Olivier certainly, before he had been upon the stage for two minutes, solved a problem that has puzzled scholars and men of letters for some hundreds of years. Why Lear adopted so foolish a plan for the division of his kingdom is a question that has long echoed round the lecture rooms of universities; and those who have waited for a satisfactory answer have not received it. But in full measure they received it from Mr. Olivier to-night.

The nature of the means by which he was to solve this problem became clear with the very rising of the curtain. Mr. George Relph and Mr. Nicholas Hannen, under the hand of Mr. Olivier as producer, make that preliminary conversation between Kent and Gloucester, which so puzzled Dr. Johnson, a thing of easy and supple comedy.

On the edge of Lear's sea of passion, "swelling, chafing, raging, without bound, without hope, without beacon or anchor," these two well-graced actors most unexpectedly find ripples of laughter; so that when the king himself appears, white-haired, white-bearded, yet swift and eager and active, we recognize him at once for what he is, a humorist, a man of infinite fecundity of wit, choleric maybe, but resilient and alert, ready in sheer intellectual energy and physical well-being for any jest or experimental escapade, whether it be sallying forth at midnight with the Doctor, or for dividing his inheritance according to the whim of a girl's rhetoric.

Before he speaks, he stops to gossip with Cordelia, he eyes one of his soldiers quizzically from top to toe and back again; he is bursting with overflow of vital forces: from his brain at any moment may spring some plan, some scheme, half-joke, half-earnest, which, born on the inspiration of a moment, may, in a sudden change of mood, have consequences to wreck kingdoms and ruin lives. And that, of course, is exactly what happens.

Mr. Olivier's Lear is very old: he is also strong. There is about him none of that senility which many great actors have affected. In poetic truth undoubtedly this is right. Under one

aspect this play presents man as the plaything of the gods: they kill us for their sport. Where the quarry is lame or feeble or impotent, surely the sport is poor? It was said of the great Duke of Marlborough that he could be bought, but that he was worth buying. Mr. Olivier's Lear is a man who by temperament is capable of being tortured: but he is worth torturing. The cries and the lamentations, the curses and the threats that are torn out of his breast are like the crash of thunder and the stab of lightning. They are not the whimpering of a weak old man: they are the groaning and the weeping of the universe. This is a cosmic grief.

To the height of the tremendous scenes in the storm, in which even Kean failed, Mr. Olivier rises with magnificent power. But his most immediately astounding effect is gained in his turning upon Regan in the courtyard, when, rage rising, and choking tears, he would unleash unnatural horrors:

"I will do such things—  
What they are, yet I know not;  
but they shall be  
The terrors of the earth."

Upon Mr. Olivier's utterance of that last line it seems as if the universe might split asunder. It recalls this same actor's great cry in *Oedipus*, which rang round the rafters of the New Theatre like the echo of the crack of doom.

There was once a time when Mr. Olivier was all violence, all extreme passion; like Kean, he was constantly upon the rack. But, as his passion has strengthened and his expression of it ripened, so has it grown more controlled. There are moments in his performance of Lear that are of utter stillness and of quiet pathos. The same power that can set the storm in motion can now calm it by the lifting of a hand.

Of the rest, Mr. Alec Guinness's Fool, so pale and anxious of face despite his smile, infinitely dejected at a jest misfired, is especially noteworthy. Miss Margaret Leighton's swooning Regan and Mr. Peter Copley's crisp Edmund, too, are good. But there is no weakness anywhere, and the central performance must stand among the greatest things ever accomplished upon the English stage.

*Daily Telegraph.* Again and again touched magnificence.  
(W. A. Darlington.)

*News Chronicle.* Olivier's *Lear* is nothing short of a tremendous achievement. (Alan Dent.)

*Observer.* A masterpiece in promise. (Ivor Brown.)

At the close of the performance dozens of 'teen-age girls—the counterpart of the bobbysox girls in America who swoon at the sight of Frank Sinatra—poured down from the gallery into the stalls to listen raptly to Mr. Olivier's curtain speech. Outside the stage-door a crowd of about a hundred people, mostly women, jammed themselves in the narrow court between the *New Theatre* and *Wyndham's*, shouting, "We want Larry. We want Larry," occasionally varying this into a chant, "Two, four, six, eight. We can appreciate Larry," the "Larry" coming out in a thunderous roar. Mr. Olivier resisted these blandishments for an hour and ten minutes, when he finally emerged protected by twelve policemen. The crowd rushed the police, and Mr. Olivier was carried helplessly along to his car a hundred yards away.

*King Lear* was given by the Old Vic in a repertory of three plays until January 4, 1947, after which Mr. Olivier began making a film of *Hamlet*. The night before the last performance of *Lear*, two girls from Upminster arrived in front of the *New Theatre* with camp-beds. They found thirty-three women and one man already settled down for the night. At midnight the temperature was eight degrees above freezing.

Actors and actresses are often pained by what they consider to be the unnecessarily savage reviews written by professional dramatic critics. That is because they don't see what is written by unprofessional critics. Against the almost universal praise of the press for Mr. Olivier's *Lear*, and the hysterical enthusiasm of large audiences, it is salutary to set the opinion of an old actor who wrote to me that he found it unbelievable that I saw no weak spots in the performance at the *New Theatre*.

Cordelia, thought this critic, was very feeble, Gloucester "completely pedestrian," and Edmund and Oswald ciphers. Goneril (Miss Pamela Browne) and Regan he thought good. The best-acted part was the Fool's, but Mr. Guinness lacked



pathos. The entire production, says this critic, was bad, and Mr. Olivier did not come within measurable distance of the power and authority of Lear.

26, THURSDAY. *The Shephard Show*, at the Princes Theatre. Graceful dancing (Boyer and Ravel), a burlesque pantomime, the singing of Miss Marie Burke, a charming chorus and an admirable excursion into patriotism by Mr. Douglas Byng, make this one of Mr. Shephard's most successful entertainments.

27, FRIDAY. *Tangent*, at the Mercury Theatre. This is probably the only play in London which in ambition of theme is not dwarfed by *King Lear*. Its author, Mr. Gilbert Horobin, puts his story in a prisoner-of-war camp, and by studying the influence of guards and captives on each other, and of environment on both, tries to analyse Europe's defeatist temper. A depressing play? On the contrary: tingling, exciting, in the performance of Mr. Anthony Sharp as one of the guards superbly funny: yet at times exalted and exalting. It is to run for a fortnight longer. It should be seen.

## OCTOBER 1946

1, TUESDAY. *An Inspector Calls*. The second first night of the Old Vic at the New Theatre is given up to J. B. Priestley's latest play. This is not the first time that the Old Vic has strayed from classic realms into the more debatable territory of modern times. On several occasions it has presented Shaw. But the performance of *An Inspector Calls* is not strictly parallel to what the Old Vic has done with *Arms and the Man* and *Major Barbara*. They were revivals: this is the first production on a London stage. Only once before has the Old Vic done an author the honour of accepting a piece before seeing it played elsewhere. Just before the war it played James Bridie's *The King of Nowhere* for the first time on any stage. Mr. Olivier was the star of that production. Mr. Olivier does not appear, however, in *An Inspector Calls*. His colleague, Mr. Ralph Richardson, takes the leading part.

In this play Mr. Priestley offers the interesting spectacle of a man whose character is quite at odds with his convictions, the clash between his thoughts and his feelings being only partly hidden by his extreme theatrical skill.

Mr. Priestley is a Yorkshireman, and the sturdy, not to say stubborn, individualism of the staunchest and most stiff-necked of English counties is bred into his innermost being. When he went over to America some years ago the frankness of his comments caused a certain amount of annoyance even in a country that prides itself on plain speaking. At the time of the German overrunning of France in 1940, Mr. Priestley delivered a series of radio addresses which, in their obstinate defiance of a seemingly all-powerful enemy, were second in influence only to the speeches of Mr. Churchill.

In private life also Mr. Priestley is impervious to the battering of outside forces. After three years at Cambridge his accent was as forthrightly provincial as when he entered the precincts of that ancient university. If there is any man *whose character and temperament fit him to be captain of his soul, master of his fate, not bother what other people think or do, and let the world go hang*, that man is Mr. Priestley.

But a man's character is one thing, his convictions are another. Mr. Priestley may *feel*, deep down inside him, that man is a creature who can snap his fingers at the universe, who thrives on opposition, and is never so happy as when engaged in a fight. But he *thinks* that he is the creature of circumstance, the sport of economic forces, the pawn of other people. Mr. Priestley was born an individualist; and has made himself into a Socialist.

So his new play, *An Inspector Calls*, is about a girl who, one afternoon in 1912, in the Yorkshire that is Mr. Priestley's home, kills herself with disinfectant. Mr. Priestley's assumption is that the girl's end is in no way due to any fault of her own. She lost her job in a factory because she encouraged a strike. She was dismissed from a shop because she smiled behind a customer's back. She was taken up and then discarded by two irresponsible young men. Finally, when in great need, she was refused help by the chairman of a woman's charity organization. Everyone pushed her and shoved her around until finally she toppled off this plane of things altogether. There was no fight in her.

This story, so sharply at odds with his sturdy individualism, Mr. Priestley elucidates with his usual technical skill. One night, while a prosperous middle-class family is celebrating the engagement of the daughter of the house to the son of a rival manufacturer, a policeman calls and begins to ask questions. Mr. Ralph Richardson plays Inspector Goole with quiet calm and a half-quizzical smile; his occasional bursts of indignation when some member of the family is particularly recalcitrant or unsympathetic are very impressive; and if, at times, he has faintly the air of the Recording Angel getting his notes together, the audience at the end will find him justified. One by one each member of the party is incriminated, or incriminates

## THEATRE

himself, and Mr. Priestley's demonstration of what unexpected revelations may be the consequence of a single unguarded admission is extremely clever. Cinquevalli's juggling could not be neater. Neither Ibsen nor Sardou could have rounded a more "Dangerous Corner."

As the young wastrel of the family, yet with a spark of sympathy left in him, Mr. Alec Guinness shows himself a notable newcomer to the Old Vic Company. There is a paleness, a weariness of face about him that recalls Fred Astaire. I have no doubt he dances less skilfully than Astaire, but he acts extraordinarily well.

*Observer.* Less generously creative than usual. (J. C. Trewin.)

2, WEDNESDAY. *Peace Comes to Peckham*, at the Embassy Theatre. Do the British boast too much of their bombs? Are Americans too warm about their refrigerators? These are the questions that Mr. R. F. Delderfield asks when two children evacuated to the United States during the war return to a backyard in Peckham. By means of them he keeps up an intermittent discussion of Anglo-American relations that generates both wit and heat. His people, however, are less interesting than his talk, and his four young lovers, whose pairing-off provides the substance of his story, behave with the intensity of lukewarm cocoa.

3, THURSDAY. *The Amiable Mrs. Luke*, at the Players' Theatre. This is a comedy about a lady who keeps a boarding-house for illegitimate babies. In it there is a scene in which a young soldier who has got a girl into trouble asks her, in a moment of kindness, to go into a pub for a drink and finds she is too young to be admitted. Not much in that, you think? Perhaps not, but if you can watch it unmoved you are better proof than I against the shyness, the awkwardness, the sincerity of Mr. Owen Holder's performance of the soldier. The rest of the play, however, I resisted with the greatest of ease.

7, MONDAY. *Our Betters* was revived at the Playhouse last week. In 1923 Margaret Bannerman played the part of Lady Grayston in this comedy of Somerset Maugham's 548 times at

the Globe Theatre. It was her only really successful role. Dorothy Dickson, who is now playing Lady Grayston in the revival at the Playhouse, has had a long string of successes during the last twenty years. But it is doubtful whether Lady Grayston will be added to them.

Since 1923 a world war has entirely changed the balance of power. And not of political power only. *Our Betters* is a satirical title that might be supposed to refer to the upper classes. Actually the reference is to rich Americans who buy their way into British society.

The women are the daughters of American industrial royalty. They search out impecunious gentlemen of title and pay their debts in return for a marriage ceremony. Then, titled themselves, and bored by their husbands, they tread the primrose path, unembarrassed by any respect for marital obligations.

The men are of the same breed. Thornton Clay, who dines out in the best houses on the strength of scandalous stories about either his friends or his relatives, is ashamed of being an American. In nasal tones he boasts of not having a trace of American accent. His clothes are aggressively Savile Row. When Fleming Hervey, a young American who does not think that the Middle West is the Ultima Thule of civilization, arrives, Thornton Clay devotes himself at once to the congenial task of trying to turn him into an imitation Englishman.

Now all this strikes an audience of to-day as curiously old-fashioned. I do not know whether in 1923 Americans strove to be mistaken for Englishmen. They certainly do not do so now. They do not try to talk with an English accent. Indeed, I have met Americans who are annoyed with Englishmen who talk with an English accent. Many of our young radio singers do their best to sound as if they were raised in Chicago. Jazz and the talkies and the shifting of gold across the Atlantic, and the swamping of English bookstalls with American magazines, have made America the imitated, not the imitator.

At any time *Our Betters* must have seemed sordid but witty. To-day it appears witty but unreal. Nor does crackling, amoral dialogue come easily to Miss Dickson. She is used to the sentimental songs of romantic musical comedy, and is unhappy with Mr. Maugham's epigrams, artful but heartless. She has

## THEATRE

abundance of the soft charm which causes Arthur Fenwick to call her "Girly," but none of the calculating hardness that is the core of Lady Grayston. She finds it easy to look like the innocent flower, but impossible to be the serpent under it.

Not till the third act does she really come to terms with her part. It is, significantly enough, the one moment when Lady Grayston has sincerity and sympathy on her side. When she turns upon her outraged and shocked young sister, who is ready to abandon her, and shows her how much she owes to the very things in Lady Grayston that she despises, Miss Dickson gets into a fine anger and delivers her speech with admirable fire.

There is an attractive sketch of a hard-up young lord by Peter Willes, and Cecil Beaton's décor is sumptuous with the right touch of vulgarity.

9, WEDNESDAY. *On the Way* (Helge Krog), at the Arts Theatre. "Is there a father's heart as well as a mother's?" cried John Tanner half a lifetime ago. If there is, Celia, the heroine of this Norwegian play, won't admit it. An unmarried mother-to-be, she refuses to take a husband, because she will not share the coming child. This is a professedly advanced play, so we are not surprised to find it as modern as matriarchy. Revolutionary politics and reactionary motherhood are discussed by a worthy company of debaters, which includes Miss Yvonne Coulette as the heroine, Miss Susan Richmond as her mother, and (blessedly) Mr. Derek Birch as an author who can wear an eyeglass, invent a thought, and even make a joke.

10, THURSDAY. *Ice Revue*, at the Stoll. There was once a British heavyweight called Iron Hague, of whom it was said that you could hit him as hard as you liked and it didn't hurt. The difference between him and the lady member of the Manley and Austin team, in the *Ice Revue* at the Stoll, is that of her the remark seems to be true. A blow on the nose elicits from her a simper. When she is taken up in both arms and hurled against the scenery, she responds with a sigh of satisfaction.

This is magnificent fooling. The skating (and principal) part of the show is wonderfully fast, graceful and agile, though

on occasion it tends to monotony. There is, perhaps, something chilling about ice. But Armand Perren and Olive Robinson achieve a strangely luscious beauty, and Cecilia Colledge accomplishes everything within the range of unerring skill.

14, MONDAY. *Piccadilly Hayride*, with Sid Field in the cast, was presented last Friday at the Prince of Wales's Theatre. Sid Field reminds me rather of the late Alexander Woollcott.

True, there are many differences between him and that eminent American. Mr. Field does not resemble Woollcott in physique, for, though he is robust enough, no one would dream of calling him fat. Nor does he, in the *Man Who Came to Dinner* manner, put vinegar into his wit, nor barbed arrows into his friends. He comes nearer to the Woollcott pattern in that he is frequently the centre of controversy, and if the controversy has been arranged beforehand, is in fact a piece of showmanship, that merely recalls that many of Woollcott's most brilliant impromptus were carefully prepared.

But even here the resemblance is far from close. Though Mr. Field will provide his interlocutors with insults, he places himself at the opposite pole from Woollcott, in that he never gives himself a reply. His cinema organist, who, after playing some silly little tune, proudly smoothes down his hair with a fatuous smile and a wave of the hand as graceful as Hoxton can make it, is interrupted by a musical enthusiast in the dress circle demanding a fugue.

It is in accord with the plan of this revue that Mr. Field does not know what a fugue is. He cannot pronounce the word. When he tries to do so, his teeth nearly drop out. His self-conceit vanishes instantly. The stupid smile still lingers on his features, but it is only a ghost of its former self. He stands at the front of the stage, a pitiable figure, pulling in embarrassment at his fingers, twisting about on his feet, resourceless in retort as a jellyfish. He appeals mutely to the conductor, who says something about following a toccata. Mr. Field perks up at once. The uncertain flicker over the face becomes once more a beaming smile. "Follows a toccata," he announces triumphantly, looking up into the circle. But the angry voice bellows out "Toccata!" in withering scorn, and Mr. Field

quivers into misery afresh. It is not thus that Woollcott would have dealt with an interruption. He would have emerged from the scene much more triumphant than Mr. Field; and much less liked.

Yet a resemblance between the two comedians undoubtedly exists. Woollcott was a cunning workman in that he made one joke, one story, do the work, not of two, but of a hundred. He was not the sort of man who made two blades of grass grow where one had grown before. His line was to make one stalk stand in place of a meadow. That touching little tale of a dog, the Verdun Belle, for example, he told so often, in print and on the radio, that John T. Winterich said it had "become a byword and a marking. I have heard it in the watchfires of a hundred circling camps . . . it has appeared in print in virtually every American periodical except the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Harvard Alumni Weekly*."

Mr. Field, it must be confessed, practises the same economy in regard to his material. His coat, in the Slasher Green sketch, has changed its colour, but hardly its texture. His attempts to play snooker, though very funny, are an exact translation of his efforts to play golf in his two previous Prince of Wales's revues. When he declares that "last night at the Albert Hall Sir Thomas Beecham conducted Shostakovitch's Seventh Symphony" his simple joy when he suddenly realizes that he has successfully pronounced Shostakovitch is charming to behold.

But a similar joy over a similar triumph has charmed us before. The tactless guest after the dinner party remarked that there had been a lot of food, such as it was. Hastily correcting himself, he added that the food had been good, what there was of it. Mr. Field's material is good, what there is of it.

The supporting company is admirable. I could hardly have enough of Terry Thomas, who, all teeth and ingratiation, spoke of having, in 1940, "received a cunningly worded invitation to join the army"; Robert Lamouret's Dudule the Duck (own cousin to Donald) is the best ventriloquist's dummy I have seen, and Blanche and Alan Lund dance with grace and speed.

16, WEDNESDAY. *Much Ado About Nothing*, at the Aldwych. Mr. Robert Donat's Benedick is a heavyweight performance.



Mr. Donat hits all Shakespeare's jokes fairly in the middle, and so hard that some of them are not robust enough to survive. Beatrice may be able to see a church by daylight, but Mr. Donat's churches are floodlit at noon. Yet curiously he under-emphasizes the climax and crisis of the play. When Marie Ney played Beatrice on the radio, in the church scene she spoke her two tremendous words, "Kill Claudio," in a voice as sharp, as clear, as cold as an icicle. I froze in my chair as I listened. When Mr. D. A. Clarke-Smith was Benedick in another production, he sprang back three paces on his horrified reply, "Not for the wide world." In the first performance I have forgotten the Benedick, in the second, the Beatrice. In this scene at the Aldwych I shall forget both. Miss Renée Asherson, who for some reason always keeps her mouth open, tries much too hard. She forces her voice so that it becomes raw and woolly. Mr. Donat doesn't try hard enough. He stumbles forward as if he had missed his footing, and mumbles his answer as though "Not for the wide world" were a stage direction meaning "Keep it to yourself, old boy." All the same, this is theatrically a superb play, and some of its beauty, wit, and excitement break through.

My opinion of *Much Ado About Nothing* was endorsed from Ormskirk, Lancashire, by a correspondent who wrote that "my sister and I found the performance (when it was done in Liverpool prior to coming to London) so tedious, we left some time before the end. We scarcely expect to see a better Benedick than Wilfrid Walter when he played in Stratford in the late twenties in one of Bridges-Adams's lovely productions—in which Eric Maxon was so elegant a Don Pedro."

23, WEDNESDAY. *The Turn of the Screw*, at the Arts. Adapted by Allan Turpin from the short story by Henry James. Those people are reasonable enough who cannot see the point of *The Turn of the Screw*. If a point is sharp and penetrating, then this story has no point. But it has an atmosphere: vague, miasmic, choking; and those susceptible to it would rather endure bombs again—yes, or beetles even—than spend a few hours alone in that terrible house where the ghosts return and the children are corrupted. Twice during the performance at

the Arts—once immediately after the governess tells Miles she wants to save him, and again at the end—I was, for a moment, genuinely and unmistakably frightened, a thing that has not happened to me in a theatre for thirty years. As the housekeeper, reliving the already experienced horror, gently, fearfully watching the governess's slow discovery of unmentioned and unmentionable things, Miss Louise Hampton gives what must be one of the best performances in London. There is about it a tranquillity, an achieved calm, that soothes the play's terrors, and makes them not only bearable, but something not to be missed.

25, FRIDAY. *Cyrano de Bergerac*, at the New Theatre, the third production of the Old Vic season, had its first performance last Wednesday. To the Frenchman literate in his country's drama, Rostand's *Cyrano* is full of echoes. The first act, with its tumult of poets and actors, bourgeois and thieves, is a gay dream of the romantic Gautier's; the second, in Ragueneau's cake shop, where the hideous Cyrano shows himself to possess a heart as tender as his sword is sharp, recalls Hugo; and the scene near the end when the heroine Roxane comes to the war camp and finds the Gascons fighting in rags and hunger, but with a fine flourish of gallant boastfulness, might almost be an episode of Dumas's.

As for the self-sacrifice of Christian, who, matching the magnanimity of Cyrano himself, endeavours at the end to surrender Roxane to that eloquent and ugly Guardsman, does it not instantly remind us of Alidor, and Pertharite, and Pulchérie, and Attale, and most of all of the *Carmosine* of Alfred de Musset? Of course it does, especially if, lying on the table before us, there is a copy of Lemaître's criticism of the first performance of *Cyrano*, in which all these comparisons are lucidly set out.

To a French audience, then, *Cyrano* is not only a pleasure in itself, but a means of recalling other pleasures. It is a recollection as well as an experience, and combines a crowded and agreeable past with a most acceptable present. But to England it comes without its overtones, its trailing cloud of theatrical and poetic glories, and it must stand or fall upon its own merits.

Upon its own merits? Upon rather a tithe of those merits. For it necessarily lacks the accomplished verses of Rostand. Those verses are swift and delightful, their rhymes are marvels of cleverness, they are both clever and musical, they entrance with their beauty, and they make one laugh.

For this bright and sparkling apparel, the Old Vic gives us the homespun cloth of Mr. Brian Hooker's pedestrian translation; it is difficult to tell at a first hearing whether it is in verse or prose. Whichever it is, it limps and halts, and gravely handicaps Mr. Ralph Richardson and the other players. It is hard work dancing in fetters, and to toss glitteringly into the air words that fall to the stage with the heavy thump of lead is a task to dispirit any actor.

Mr. Richardson, however, hurled about these masses of inert verbosity with untiring skill. What is more, and what is almost incredible, he did this with at least an appearance of lightness. I will not say that the mountains of difficulty that Mr. Hooker placed before him vanished at his approach; but he made them seem no worse than hillocks.

It has been objected by the English critics that *Cyrano* is psychologically untrue. Here is a man, they say, who, because of his enormous, his ridiculous, his altogether preposterous nose is unable to marry the lady of his choice.

It is a matter of common experience, they point out, that unattractive men frequently, and with every appearance of subsequent happiness, marry the most beautiful women.

This is true enough, but it does not invalidate the thesis of Rostand's play. For it is nowhere stated, or even implied, that Roxane could not love Cyrano. It is merely said that Cyrano believed she could not. Surely even an ugly man may be modest, without building up a theory of the Universal Unacceptability of the Unattractive? But with such a translation as Mr. Hooker's any misconception is possible.

*Daily Telegraph.* A magnificent piece of theatre. (W. A. Darlington.)

The setting, designed by Tanya Moseiwitsch, the third she has done for the Old Vic, is also the most difficult. It has five complete changes of scenery, and 150 costumes.

## NOVEMBER 1946

5, TUESDAY. *There are Crimes and Crimes*, at the New Lindsey. The Lindsey production is claimed to be the first performance of the play in England. It seems to me that it would be truer to say that the first performance is something still to be seen, the Lindsey production being only a simulacrum. It is no more than a shapeless shadow of Strindberg's drama of the young Parisian dramatist who momentarily wishes his child dead so that he may run away with the woman who has fascinated him, and then collapses in bitter remorse. Whatever Miss Wanda Rotha and Mr. Manning Whiley have to contribute to the unhappy principals of the play is routed by inadequate scenery, irregular pauses, and the defective grammar of the translation. A tragedy that should move swiftly and smoothly to its catastrophe jerks and stutters like a cheap car starting up on a cold morning.

Were there then no pleasures on Tuesday evening? There were. They were provided chiefly by Mr. Anthony Eustrel as the kindly lover who makes all things easy for his rival. There could hardly be a finer portrait of a hurt man who tries to comfort those that wound him. And, too, Mr. Tristan Rawson's smiling priest had a calm that was radiant as well as quiet. I should record that the audience, whilst appreciating Mr. Rawson and Mr. Eustrel, disagreed with me on all else.

6, WEDNESDAY. Lunched at the Ivy with Robert Morley and Raymond Mould. Like Forbes-Robertson, Morley doesn't like acting. He is never elated to see the curtain go up; he is always relieved to see it come down. "How much nicer it would be to stay here talking all the afternoon," he exclaims,

"than to rush off to a *matinée*" (he is playing in *The First Gentleman* at the Savoy). "Better still, how much nicer to play bridge." Forbes-Robertson preferred painting, Morley writing. Acting, he says, is not intellectual. "Larry [Olivier] thinks it comes from here" (he taps his forehead). "But it doesn't. It's here," and he slaps himself over the heart.

7, THURSDAY. *Treble Trouble*, at the Garrick. In *Treble Trouble* two deserted husbands become involved in doing the homework of the schoolgirl daughter of a third. The patient resignation of Mr. Anthony Shaw and Mr. Sydney King, trapped by their ill-advised boasting into writing an essay on stained-glass windows in Norman churches, is a happier invention than is usual in farces. It did much to reconcile me to the rest of the entertainment.

20, WEDNESDAY. *A Phoenix too Frequent*, at the Arts. Mr. Christopher Fry, in this play, has hit upon the most macabre notion for a comic story since Stevenson invented *The Wrong Box*. Mr. Fry could make a ghoul laugh; ghosts hold their gaunt sides at his approach. He gets more cheerfulness out of coffins than most people would from the abolition of bread rationing. His scene is a graveyard; the time is two in the morning, when even the warmest blood is sluggish; his characters are a mistress and a maid about to die, and a soldier on the point of being hanged; the main topic of conversation is suicide; the whole thing is very funny. I feel it oughtn't to be, but it is.

The company is first class. As the lady who changes her mind about following her husband to the shades, Miss Hermione Hammen intones thunderous absurdities with a sense now and again of the ridiculous; Miss Joan White's cheeky maid has the single moment in the play when poetry vanquishes wit, though I shouldn't be surprised if neither she nor the author knows which this is. The soldier is Mr. Paul Scofield. Here is an actor of presence and potentiality. He has a trick of ending a phrase on a rising note, with a sudden, detached and meditative tone. The suspicion occurs to me that he has seen and heard Mr. Laurence Olivier. The play is in verse. Since one

wouldn't ever guess it without being told, this need worry nobody.

22, FRIDAY. Second night of *Lady Frederick* at the Savoy. Mr. Somerset Maugham certainly devised an effective opening to the third act of his *Lady Frederick*. For two acts Miss Coral Browne has been flamboyantly preening round the stage, turning the men's heads, and twisting the women's tails. In one magnificent costume after another devised for her in the mode of 1885 by Mr. Anthony Holland, a young stage designer of considerable achievement and still greater promise, she has come to her drawing-room in Monte Carlo trailing clouds of a glamorous past behind her, and enmeshing in its coils svelte elderly men of the world like the cynical and epigrammatic Paradine Foulkes and earnest, ingenuous youthful peers of the realm like the Marquis of Merceston. The women tattle and plot against her, but the men fall more or less instant victims to her long, gleaming black hair and the delicate, eloquent pink of her cheeks.

The third act opens in Lady Frederick's dressing-room at ten o'clock in the morning, when her ladyship is only just rising from bed. A hard, dazzling light comes in through the window like a sword. Lady Frederick, the flashing charmer of the previous part of this play, emerges from behind a screen in a tousled dressing-gown, with what remains of her black hair hanging in ropy wisps round cheeks cadaverous and pasty, a Meg Merrilees in *déshabillé*, a potential Mrs. Gamp without her umbrella.

For a moment, the flow of one's blood is checked; the audience shrinks from this exposure of beauty unprepared. Everything has been built up to give to this scene its full impressiveness; and Miss Browne, who hitherto has been revelling in feminine allurements, throws herself into the hideousness of her transformation with a single-hearted zest and power that are as complimentary to her histrionic skill as they are a tribute to her lack of personal vanity. The scene may not be altogether pleasant. Neither is a straight left to the jaw pleasant, but it does its job if it is well delivered.

It is, of course, delivered for a purpose. For Lady Frederick,

knowing that she is, at twice his age, no suitable wife for a simple-hearted Marquis, hits on this plan for disillusioning him. He sees the coils of hair stuck on, the complexion conjured out of pots, the eyebrows pencilled in. At the end of it all he is faint and gasping, but still, like a gentleman, protesting that his affection is unchanged. But the effort is visibly great; Lord Mereston has little skill in ignoring what is going on right under his eyes; though Mr. Vernon Greeves gives him an immature charm, he lacks Nelson's Copenhagen touch, and when Lady Frederick refuses him he feels more relief than sorrow.

The dialogue of the play is a crackle of epigrams; the paradoxes go off like minute guns, but like minute guns fired every second. Mr. Edwin Styles in particular, as Paradine Foulkes, discharges them with the easiest elegant skill imaginable, but his voice does not reach the back of the theatre; they are aimed with the most delicate precision, but they do not carry. Miss Browne, as may already have been gathered, has a tremendous evening; she takes the play in both hands and whirls it round her head with the fervour of a dancing dervish, and the complicated skill of a fine piece of machinery.

The stage designer, too, Mr. Holland, has a magnificent time. With glint and flamboyance he reproduces the splendours of the late nineteenth-century age of British opulence, and gowns his ladies in dresses that sweep the board. Mr. Holland is new to London, having recently come from the Oxford repertory theatre; he should not be allowed again to dream under those spires.

28, THURSDAY. *The Cat Among the Pigeons*, at the Gateway Theatre Club. The second greatest living dramatic critic once had a strange experience. He wandered out of a theatre during the first interval, and didn't remember the play again until he found himself at home. A fear that something of the same sort might happen to a less eminent person kept me riveted to my seat from curtain rise to fall of Marie Oxenford's slender anecdote about a best-selling frivolous novelist who tries to thwart her husband's candidature for Parliament because it might make him pompous. For let me, like Agag, treading

delicately, admit that *The Cat Among the Pigeons* is less exciting than an air raid, not so slick as Wilde, and intellectually inferior to Newton (either Isaac or Eric—I don't care which).

To criticize more particularly would be to emulate that short-sighted man in Evelyn—his name was Petty, but his wit was not—who, given the choice of weapons in a duel<sup>1</sup> elected for hatchets. Against so unpretentious a comedy as this, in which laughs are as plentiful as snakes in Iceland, even the flimsiest weapon turns into something brutal. I will therefore merely observe that Miss Frances More, as the novelist, acts with poise and coolness, that Mr. Edward Rutherford has the profile of a cardinal in youth, and that Mr. Gordon Gilmour plays with a pleasing assurance, though I can't help wondering why he throws his chest out as if he had someone at the back of the theatre waiting to catch it. My ration of praise for the week is now so depleted that what's left isn't worth distributing.



# DECEMBER 1946

THURSDAY. *The Fatal Curiosity*, at the Arts. It is understood that one day recently Miss Beatrix Lehmann came to the management of the Arts Theatre with the announcement that she had found an extremely funny play. The management was delighted: which merely shows that the best of men may err.

For Miss Lehmann, though one of the finest tragic actresses in Britain—she was magnificent in O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*—has no sense of humour. She is physically a small, thin woman, but she can horrify and astound in the grand manner. But she cannot make an audience laugh. Now the Arts Theatre management knows these things, yet, when Miss Lehmann told them she had found a funny play, these wise and experienced people believed her. They have been regretting it ever since.

In past Christmases the Arts has put on one or two mid-Victorian melodramas, full of dewy-eyed heroines and moustache-stroking villains, crammed with inflated dialogue and stagy situations, which they have guyed with interspersed song and dance. These have been vastly amusing, and the expectation was that Miss Lehmann's choice would prove to belong to the same genre.

Its name, when she revealed it, turned out to be *The Fatal Curiosity*, by George Lillo, a working jeweller of the early eighteenth century. It certainly tells a story of extraordinary luridness, which is said to be based on incidents that actually happened on the coast of Cornwall in the reign of James I. A shipwrecked sailor, home from the Indies with vast wealth hidden in his pockets, finds his devoted parents, having given

him up for lost, sunk in poverty and misery. As a sort of joke, he does not tell them at once who he is, but shows his ~~cashet~~ <sup>chest</sup> of jewels to his mother, and then retires to bed, intending to reveal the happy secret the next morning. That morning, of course, he never sees. For the mother, unable to withstand the temptation, persuades her reluctant husband to murder the stranger as he sleeps.

Miss Lehmann might easily have acted in just such a play as this herself. If she had, imagination staggers at the heights of horror she would have mounted in it. Towards the end of the eighteenth century Mrs. Siddons played the part of Mrs. Wilmot, and it is reckoned among her triumphs. It might well have been among Miss Lehmann's also. But Miss Lehmann decided otherwise. She thought the play was funny.

As producer she has travestied and burlesqued the piece. Yet even here she has shown little invention. There are no songs; there are no dances. She has relied entirely on making the players use exaggerated gestures, false intonations of voice, and over-emphasis. Lines like the returning sailor's apostrophizing of England as a "land of plenty" are pushed into our attention with unhappy fervour. And, of course, from time to time, the audience laughs. But uneasily. And with a vague feeling that somehow or other it is rather a shame.

For the simple truth is that, despite Miss Lehmann's exaggeration of every aspect capable of absurdity in a story as bloodthirsty as the end of *Hamlet*, *The Fatal Curiosity* is the work of an admirable poet. The play begins with old Wilmot alone upon the stage, lamenting the hardness and the injustice of the world. The first few lines Mr. Hugh Griffith speaks in a serious voice, and with considerable sonority, and they do not fail of their effect. Only gradually, and as it were reluctantly, does this actor slip over to the side of burlesque, and even to the end of the play it is possible to discern the fineness of many of the lines beneath the ragged absurdity in which Miss Lehmann's production has clothed them.

The result has been a curious small triumph for Lillo. Audiences that were invited to jeer at Lillo have gone away respecting him. The convention in which Lillo wrote is now

ridiculous, but the work he did in it was work of quality, and, as the critic of *The Times* has said in this connection, it is "somehow degrading" to make fun of it.

19, THURSDAY. *Pacific, 1860*, at Drury Lane. In any case the reopening to the public of Drury Lane was bound to be a great theatrical occasion. For seven years this famous playhouse has been closed to the general theatre-going population. During that time it has organized, rehearsed, and dispatched ENSA shows to all parts of the world; and a bomb has crashed through its dress circle to explode at the back of the pit.

The management has spared no effort to make the occasion even more notable than its inherent nature guarantees it to be. It is said that wartime damage to Drury Lane is of the order of £50,000, but the responsible Ministry has allowed the theatre only a tenth part of this sum to put the place into proper repair. The renovation of this great playhouse, which was founded by Charles II, and rests on foundations laid by Sir Christopher Wren, has had therefore to be carried out with prefabricated materials. But this is not apparent to the spectator's eye. The vast auditorium, which Wyatt built in 1812, looks now, as it used to do before the war, with its wide sweep of galleries, soberly grand, quietly opulent.

The author chosen to write the play for Drury Lane's post-war production is Noel Coward. There could be no better choice. Though not a highbrow, Mr. Coward has a reputation at which highbrows do not sneer; and he is a recognized master of that kind of spectacular display which the huge stage of Drury Lane is supposed to demand. To act in Mr. Coward's play, an American actress, Mary Martin, has been brought over to London. The recent war almost ended that interchange of artists across the Atlantic which used to keep London and New York intimately acquainted with each other's players. Miss Martin's transit of the ocean was therefore regarded as a sign of the happy resumption of pre-war pleasures; and she was, in addition, eagerly awaited on her own account.

The entire enterprise, however, proves a considerable disappointment. Mr. Coward's play, a musical romance taking place on a beautiful tropical island, is called *Pacific, 1860*. To

this island comes a world-famous singer, with whom the elder son of the principal planter on the island, Kerry Stirling (Mr. Graham Payn) falls in love. His parents are scandalized, and at the end of the second act Elena leaves the island at dawn on a boat that sails majestically down the river as Kerry holds out his arms despairingly from the shore. In the third act Elena returns on the day of Stirling's wedding to someone else, but discovers just in time that the Stirling who is being married is Kerry Stirling's brother.

This story is neither better nor worse than those with which Mr. Coward has performed wonders in previous musical entertainments. But on this occasion he is not particularly witty, and his tunes are tired. Nevertheless, he has his moments even in *Pacific, 1860*. There is a charming song for six bridesmaids who would prefer to be brides; and Mr. Payn, standing on the steps of the Stirling residence, as his brother and his wife come out from the house after their wedding, speaks with beautiful sincerity a toast to the natural human desire for the enduringness of affection. This is only a small moment in the play, but it is one worth waiting for.

And Miss Martin? She is very pretty; she has great charm; she moves so gracefully in her crinoline as to make it an enchantment to the eye. Her voice is soft and low, which we are told is an excellent thing in woman; and she sings agreeably. But, since she is supposed to be a world-famous concert artist, it has been remarked as unfortunate that some of the ladies in her train, notably perhaps Miss Sylvia Cecil, sing better, or at any rate, louder, than she does.

21, SATURDAY. December has been a slack month in the theatre. The great theatrical boom which began in the middle of the war, and was interrupted only, and not destroyed, by the episode of the flying bombs (the subsequent rockets had no effect on it), seems to have come to an end. Just as Mr. Charles Cochran, as it were, made the world slump official in 1932 by simultaneously announcing the withdrawal of *Cavalcade*, *Helen*, and *The Miracle*, so the present break in the theatre's popularity has had the seal set on it this month by his taking off *Big Ben* from the Adelphi. This decision came as a great surprise to

the cast of seventy, who had been planning to hold a Christmas party on the stage. But there had been a heavy drop in receipts, and the present system of theatre taxation makes it impossible for Mr. Cochran to continue the production. *Big Ben*, a musical comedy by Sir Alan Herbert and Vivian Ellis, cost £30,000 to produce, and its first night last July was a considerable social occasion. To say that it was not a success without mentioning entertainment tax is like saying that the Garden of Eden was not a success without mentioning the serpent. The piece was played to large audiences in the provinces and in London on 258 occasions. During the twenty-one weeks' London run the average takings were £3,800 a week, and Sir Alan Herbert says that personally he earned more from *Big Ben* than from any other single activity of his whole career. During its ten weeks' preliminary country run *Big Ben* played to packed houses, and the receipts were £38,766. Of that sum, says Sir Alan, Mr. Cochran handed over £11,400 to the State.

For the first fifteen weeks of the London run the average takings were £5,800 gross. Entertainment tax took £1,700 of this, leaving the management £4,100. The cost of running the show was £3,000 a week, so that the manager's profit, with which he has to pay off his original production costs, was £1,100 a week against the State's £1,700. Yet the manager risks thousands of pounds in putting on a show, whilst the State risks nothing. Heads the State wins, tails the manager loses. Altogether the public has paid £154,000 to see *Big Ben*, and of this £45,000 was taken by the State. Unless a big musical play begins to attract capacity audiences at once, it is bound to lose money, and immediately it ceases to attract capacity houses it has to be taken off.

Elizabeth and I spent this afternoon at the dress rehearsal of H. J. Byron's *Cinderella* burlesque at the Players' Theatre. It was a very protracted entertainment. At the end of each short scene there was a break for photographs to be taken. Some members of the cast came down during those breaks to sit for a few moments in front and smoke a cigarette. *Note on scarcity of materials*: a young woman in a white, billowing dress carefully lifted it above her waist so as not to sit on and

soil it. Knickers do not use as much material as dresses: and (except on this occasion) are not so plainly seen.

Many of the London theatres are now given over to seasonal entertainments, which are not without their suggestions of deeper matters. For example, the two children Tom and Tilly, charmingly played by Keith Lloyd and Patsy Ann Hedges, in *The Land of the Christmas Stocking* at the Duke of York's, are both Higher Critics. They do not believe in Father Christmas; in their philosophy what you put into stockings is legs, not presents. They remain pert, secure, and defiant in their rationalism till Santa Claus himself deploys for their happy discomfiture all the inhabitants of Nursery-Rhyme Island, a band of robbers and their cave, and a squadron of dancing fairies led by Miss Mary Honer.

Now, if to release at Christmas time a whole avalanche of seasonable delights is the mark of Santa Claus himself, then that august title might well belong this year, in collective splendour, to the managers of the London theatres. Turkeys they may have no more than the rest of us; sultanas and glazed fruits may be beyond their range; their holding in indoor fireworks may be small.

But they have legions of fairies and acres of glittering spangles; Emile Littler's *Mother Goose* at the Casino, with Nat Mills and Bobbie, and Stanley Holloway, is bigger and brighter than ever. They have decisive and definite comedians; is not Cyril Fletcher in *Dick Whittington* at the Alexandra, Stoke Newington, and George Jackley at the Finsbury Park Empire, also in *Dick Whittington*? There is *Cinderella* at Golders Green; for gory-minded little boys what could be better than *Treasure Island* at the Whitehall? There are pirates again at the Scala in *Peter Pan*, and a well-meaning and truly alarming child, in the finest traditions of the *enfant terrible*, in *Just William* at the Granville, Walham Green.

There are magicians: Dante in *Sim-Sala-Bim* at the Garrick, and Jasper Maskelyne, that debonair bearer of a famous name, in *Hey Presto*, at the Westminster. There are transformation scenes; there are horses and acrobats and rushing, roaring, galloping animals, and magnificent athletes at *Bertram Mills's Circus* at Olympia.

There are *Jack and the Beanstalk* at the King's, Hammer-smith, and at the Royal, Stratford, from Boxing Day, *Vice Versa*, and a harlequinade.

There is even poetry. It comes, not, as might be supposed by the literate and unwary, from Dante, but from Mr. Fletcher, who, like Keats, writes Odes. "There's glory for you," said Humpty-Dumpty; and glorious it all is, indeed: a real knock-down argument to overwhelm and utterly destroy the resistance of the most sceptical Toms, and even Tillies, in London.

Of all these splendours, what will remain in the memory? Mr. Michael Martin-Harvey's tow-headed, grotesque, alliterative Odd Man Out in *The Land of the Christmas Stocking*? Perhaps. *Mother Goose* which, directed by Charles Hickman, is very nearly the best pantomime I have ever seen? Undoubtedly; and in it especially Nat Mills and the delectable Bobbie, with her sniffing aspirations to play the violin, her abbreviated skirts, which sometimes fall off, and her tilted inquiring face, the patient ecstasy of gormlessness.

I shall not forget Dante, either, who slices a woman in two with less emotion than ordinary people carve a duck. Dante is a distinguished creature: his pointed Vandyke beard, and his carefully arranged white hair, and his surprising calmness recall one of those courtly paintings of the age of the first Charles that hang in the great art galleries of the world. Only his American accent, and his frequent quizzical smile, and perhaps his evening dress, are out of the character of those grave wigged portraits: and perhaps the sauciness of his gags recalls the first Charles less than the second.

And the circus. I shall remember the circus. The sawdust and the prancing horses, the raking lights, the clowns, the long-maned lions, Les Idalys cycling upside down in the roof, all blue and gleaming white satin, without a net, braver than the Charge of the Light Brigade—yes, I shall certainly remember the circus.

But most and longest, I shall recall *The Fairy Queen*, that operatic and balletic version of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* at Covent Garden, especially the opening of the third act, where David Davenport sits enthroned as Phoebus, a superb Red Indian-like figure, with golden rays shooting out from all

sides of his head, while he majestically gazes down on wheeling, swaying masses of worshipping dancers and singers, and the triumphant notes of Purcell's trumpets ride magnificently over all.

24, TUESDAY. *The Man from the Ministry*, at the Comedy. From the moment that Henry Brown, unmarried, just demobilized, walks into the Ministry of Reconstruction blandly expecting it to provide him with a home, until at the end of the play he is called to account for the crime of having built 500 houses in record time, without signing the necessary forms, this piece is a sustained and brilliantly amusing satire. Stevenson, in an odd phrase, talked of our "great task of happiness"; this play makes happiness a pleasure.

I cannot praise too highly Mr. Clifford Mollison's performance as the suave, good-hearted and entirely illegal builder. What are its distinctive ingredients? Firstly, a degree of hustle that would cause Mr. Mollison to be hailed as a man and a brother on the other side of the Atlantic; and secondly, a quality that is rarely associated with hustle, namely, gentleness. Here is a lion with all a lion's effect, that yet roars as gently as any sucking dove: I repeat, in the realm of froth and frivolity, a superb performance.



# JANUARY 1947

1, WEDNESDAY. *The Master Builder*, at the Arts. I find this play, like the universe and the way of an eagle in the air, incomprehensible. I don't understand why Hilda Wangel, having urged her Master Builder to the top of his tower, apparently cannot see when he falls, though he is dashed to pieces before her eyes. I don't even understand whether Hilda is real, or only an aspect of Solness's personality, with its passionate longing for youth, and its insane fear of it. More particularly still, I don't understand why, when all the talk in the piece is of churches with towers, the only ones the producer, Mr. Peter Ashmore, lets us see are churches with spires. But, incomprehensible or not, there blows through this play a loud and gusty wind of genius, which in some of the drabber productions I have seen has chilled the audience to the marrow, but at the Arts sets everybody tingling with an invigorated and refreshed excitement.

It will be a long time before we see the play better directed or better acted. Mr. Frederick Valk's Solness is a magnificent struggle between this fine actor's great energy and power and his imperfect acquaintance with the trickier rhythms of English speech. About Miss Valerie White's Hilda, with her very high colour and her very fair hair, there is a fascinating and dangerous illumination: she flashes, through the play's gloom, the wrecker's lights. Miss Jane Henderson's Mrs. Solness is less showy, but equally moving. Miss Henderson provides a darker and more definite personality than is usually given to that dejected lady. Set between Mr. Valk's thwarted thunder and Miss White's threatening radiance, Miss Henderson's performance has a contrasting and sad tranquillity.

That strange story about the burning of the dolls cannot ever have been told more quietly, or, with its sudden and momentary breakdown into tears, more touchingly. This is an evening to remember.

15, WEDNESDAY. *Smith in Arcady*, at the Embassy. Smith comes to Sunbury as the emissary of a paternal, not to say grandmotherly, Government. His object is to establish a Social Centre, to bring model drains to the village, and fretwork to the villagers. Now, to the discussion of the massive theme of the Socialization of England, this play's intellectual resources are unequal. I have heard limericks of more impressive brain-power. But what of that? *Smith in Arcady* is not a battle-cry of the Conservative Central Office. It is a jest. It is a frolic. It is a romp.

In one respect, it is perhaps something more. They used to say in Winchester—and perhaps still do—that manners make man. It is as the perfect Wykehamist that Mr. Kynaston Reeves chooses to play the reactionary Sir Geoffrey Chater; even his quotations from Horace are in the character of the most gracious of English schools. Whether it is also in character that Sir Geoffrey shall too much regard the pleasures of the table is a matter in which I, a stranger to those meads and cloisters, would walk with a wary tread, for I am almost certain that Sir Geoffrey's favourite line in English poetry, despite his doctor's warnings, must be "port after stormy seas." But equally certain it is, that if drunk one must get, it should be after the manner of Sir Geoffrey. In the third scene of this play, when in a subdued rapture Mr. Reeves extols social inequality and snobbery and style and grace and poise and all unfairness, most unexpectedly, most wonderfully, there are the real, the undoubted vine leaves in his hair. For a few moments the theatre is illuminated, and a magic is thrown over all the past. Mr. Reeves's is a very notable performance, and it is more than adequately supported by an excellent company.

## FEBRUARY 1947

3, MONDAY. *Murder in the Cathedral*, at the Lyric. During the first weeks of the year Jimmie had been feeling the severity of the weather. He told me that henceforward he would always take his holidays in January, and spend the time in some warmer place than London. So to-day I went to the first of two special matinées of this T. S. Eliot play. Jimmie never could stand poetic plays, anyhow, in January or July.

4, TUESDAY. *Galway Handicap*, at the Lyric, Hammersmith.

5, WEDNESDAY. *Ill Met by Moonlight*, at the Vaudeville. Let me briefly dispose of *Galway Handicap*. This comic Irish medley (O'Casey's humour but not O'Casey's passion) isn't my sort of play. A talented actor, Mr. Max Adrian, wearing not one article of clothing that matches with any other, and looking like a scarecrow that has been dragged through a sewer, leaves hardly a square inch of his body unscratched. The very able leading lady, whom I shall desire hereafter to see in a better play than this, is made by the exigencies of her part to appear almost as blowsy. I tried hard during the evening to forget the first critical principle I learned at my mother's knee, namely: better performing fleas in a circus than on the stage. But I failed.

One word more; a large audience received the piece with every manifestation of delight, and the prettiest young actress in London, who is Miss Isabel Dean, told me it enormously amused her.

After this I went to *Ill Met by Moonlight*, presented by the Dublin Gate Theatre company, in some apprehension, for the

plumbing of Connemara, where the action takes place, might be as defective as that of Galway. But as soon as the curtain rose on the home of the sceptical professor, Prosper, my fears were removed. There was revealed a huge hall in a great house, the central feature of which was a vast and gloomy pillar soaring to an immensely high roof. There was a great staircase, there were Gothic windows, there was ivy flapping against the panes, there were pools of threatening shadow. It was like Hugo, even like Horace Walpole; and I realized with a lightening heart that, though bats might fly in at these windows, any beetles on the floor would, in this kind of play, be politely ignored. In fact, what we got was neither beetles nor bats, but bogles.

In Chesterton's admirable play *Magic*, the chief character dabbles unwisely in the supernatural. It begins with table-turning, and it ends with the spirits turning the tables. That is what nearly happens to Professor Sebastian Prosper. He does not believe in fairies; but by the end of Mr. Micheál MacLiammóir's play the massivity of his incredulity is at any rate shaken; and that shaking is a memorable experience, dramatic, suggestive, frightening, and funny.

Mr. MacLiammóir tells the story of a changeling. His Catherine Mallaroe is brought to Prosper's house by his nephew Robert. She wanders out into the garden by moonlight, and when she returns she is not Catherine any more. In both phases she is played by Miss Eithne Dunne. Before the metamorphosis Miss Dunne speaks one line about love in such a way that even a man half-deaf could not fail to recognize an actress of quality; and afterwards, for the rest of the evening, though there are other excellent performances, she dominates the stage. When she comes back from the midnight she is partly that horrible Green Woman in *Peer Gynt*, and she is partly a child; and it is the child part of her that is the more terrible. The long fingers stretched out like an incantation, the sidelong glances, the cowering before flowers, the panic at a sudden flame, the whining laugh, the voice coming as from an immense distance—are these things stagy? If so, I can only say that the stage becomes them, and that they become the stage.

The scene in which the changeling tries to unsettle the Professor is admirable; and that of the exorcism is finer still. A scientific experiment of the Professor's has failed to defeat her. Lee, the friendly and familiar manservant, is at once religious and pagan, but he too is beaten. The actual exorcism itself, startling as an unexpected lightning flash on a dark night, coming from a quarter wholly unforeseen, shows Mr. MacLiammóir's theatrical mastery.

Mr. Hilton Edwards has produced the play sensitively, and his portrait of the Professor is carefully composed; perhaps he might be a trifle more alarmed in the second act. Mr. MacLiammóir's Lee is an amusing fellow, Miss Maureen Cusack's Bairbre an enchanting match between natural shyness and conscientious sauciness; and Mr. Ronald Ibbs as the family's guest agreeably shows that the jokes the Irish make about the English are much the same as the English make about themselves.

6, THURSDAY. *She Wanted a Cream Front Door*, at the Apollo Theatre. This is a farce of quality in which the usual dreary farcical appurtenances—a scene in a hotel bedroom, jokes about unfaithfulness, pyjamas, undressing, caviar and champagne—are unexpectedly turned to affection and sentiment largely by Miss Constance Lorne's delicate and tender study of a daily maid who grows into a wife. Robertson Hare and Peter Haddon excellent. A surprising and gratifying evening.

9, SUNDAY. *Murder in the Cathedral*, at the Lyric. After its two special matinées last week, *Murder in the Cathedral* begins a short season at the Mercury to-morrow. Mr. T. S. Eliot's verse-play has been much admired, and I can't deny that it is full of intellectual ingenuities and nice turns of theological thought. No poetic drama of our time is more worthy of respect. And as far as I am concerned, that finishes it. The very last quality for which I look in a poem is respectability; passion, music, abandon, magic, the divine afflatus, what you will: but respectability? No. Either poetry intoxicates, or it is nothing. In all this elaborate ritual, I found not a dram, a drain, a fluid ounce of aesthetic inebriety. It is as sober as a judge, as inspired as the Woolsack.

And what of Mr. Robert Speaight's performance as the slain archbishop? None of his contemporaries is so richly endowed with magnificence of voice, is so able to make the earth quake, and the stars tremble. If the thunder could syllable forth men's names, it would speak in accents such as these; if Leviathan were articulate, and articulate on the scale of his bulk and vast assemblance, I can imagine that he would talk in no other voice than Mr. Speaight's.

Mr. Speaight makes noble use of this magnificent endowment; from the moment when, on his splendid unobserved entry, the silver tones of Becket cut across the cackle of the Canterbury women, until with arms outspread before the altar, he stands with his back to the hacking swords of his tormentors, Mr. Speaight's performance is never less than fine. But I think it lacks the ultimate magic as surely as does Mr. Eliot's play. It makes its effects with certainty, even with bravura: but these effects are foreseen. Once only, when Becket falters in his speech about his forthcoming martyrdom, does Mr. Speaight give us the unexpected miracle, the sprung surprise, that is the final reward of playgoing. Then, indeed, he is through our defences before we have had time to erect them, and victory undisputed shines momentarily upon his crest.

I salute, too, the most subtle Tempter of Mr. E. Martin Browne. If you are curious to know how evil a glitter a certain kind of asceticism can carry, watch Mr. Browne's face as he turns even righteousness into a snare.

11, TUESDAY. George Richards sends me from Dorset the most vigorously expressed letter I've yet had. "Not entirely," he says—"not entirely as a means of getting warm without unconscionably consuming electricity I hereby vehemently protest two of your critical verdicts last Sunday, and not even my considerable satisfaction-cum-relief at your disrespectful but faithful dealing with the portentously boring T. S. Eliot affair (is not the title *Murder in the Cathedral* the very apex of amateurish self-stultification and inartistic bathos?) shall prevent my doing this.

"It so happens that I have seen both *Galway Handicap* and *She Wanted a Cream Front Door* on their provincial trials.

What is wrong with the former is not that it is a certain *kind* of play (and surely to ~~win~~ a play because it is of a certain kind is dramatic criticism *in profundis*) but that it is a loosely constructed and inconsequent essay in a kind in which masterpieces (too obviously incomparable save to the presumptuously foolhardy) already exist. However, I won't deny your notice of this provided an after-Sunday-dinner chuckle or two.

"Where I really boiled over was when I came to your quite monstrously misplaced commendation (and recommendation) of the impudently feeble, incompetent, slapdash, unredeemably vulgar rubbish calling itself *She Wanted a Cream Front Door*. I am no highbrow and have a tolerant and catholic stomach for the broadest of theatrical fun provided it is (a) honest and (b) calls for some skill in its own style of performance, but for once in this case I felt it a duty to go 'round behind' and protest volubly and verbally at what I considered an affront to the intelligence of a British, even if a Bournemouth, audience."

To this lively communication George Richards adds a postscript:

"P.S. And I find it *horrifying* to a degree that a self-respecting dramatic critic can applaud the degrading antics of that effete lout——" but I'd better break off here. No names, no libel.

Mr. Richards is, of course, right in saying that what matters is not, what kind of a play is this, but how good is it of its kind? All critics, however, like certain kinds of plays better than others. All critics, moreover, can be divided into two classes. One class admits it.

About *She Wanted a Cream Front Door*, I am quite unrepentant. I found it neither impudent nor vulgar. It is a farce, that is, the sort of play in which decent feelings are generally ridiculed, in which the men are leering lumps of lubricity endowed with locomotion, and the women not much better. What a relief it is, then, to discover a farce in which the human values are never falsified, in which it is not suggested that to be faithful is to be dull, or that the quickest way to bliss is through a bedroom door.

Nor can I agree that the play is unskilful. Take the middle scene in the piece. The hero, a much bullied, humble "

man who is devoted to my  
give his gadabout wife a  
night to a flash hotel  
respondent, only to find  
has engaged, that the  
his maid, who knows  
an affair like this  
the unmarried

playc  
hundreds of... propriety,  
with wh... ever, there  
was no... son? Because  
Maggie... the feeling of  
pr... middle-aged sobri-  
the author, A. L.  
as this, at night,  
audience, an author wh  
man—of Beetho  
"For Man's Desiring": and do  
making anyone laugh, is so  
evening was both surprising

we, at the Embassy Theatre. What is  
poster observes wittily, "the affair  
? Browning hardly thought so.

How man goes on adding one,  
hun at:  
his h ag at  
M:

ans: ms co nsible to *Walden*.  
ing in more ne hat it is worse to  
a lab car than to get a duck  
ough g ng all over the pavilion  
clock. Th ay t etry, but it is not the  
quickest over ies. Or think of the  
duellist v opp rings down a pheasant.  
Is he to ed t ng, or commiserated on  
his fig one no answer ese questions,



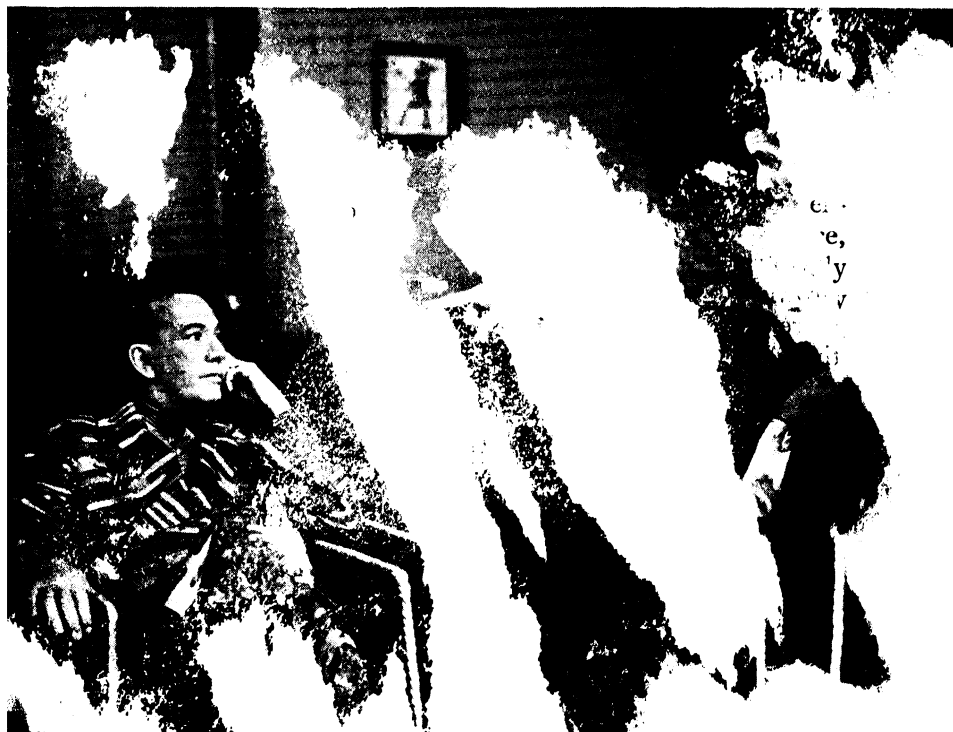
Eileen Herlie as the Queen  
and James Donald as the  
poet in *The Eagle Has  
Two Heads*

(Theatre Royal,  
Haymarket)



Noel Coward as the success-  
ful dramatist and Robert  
Farren as the young man  
from Uckfield in *Present  
Laughter*

(Theatre Royal,  
Haymarket)



Do we get it? No. We get instead an admirable play of a quite different kind. In *Hattie Stowe* there are, indeed, only two characters intrinsically capable of the power and force proper to an epic. One of these is Rankin, quietly and effectively played by Mr. Julian Dallas; he disappears after the first act. The other is Henry Ward Beecher, to whom Mr. Anthony Nicholls lends a fine appearance and a resonant voice. But for some reason Mr. Hay has chosen to present Beecher as much of a prig and something of a hypocrite, a Charles Honeyman of sounding brass and tinkling cymbal. Theatrically it is an interesting device; but it removes the trumpet from the lips of the only man left who could blow upon it the requisitely strong fanfare.

What, then, remains? A quiet, charming story of a gentle and clever lady who, out of a contented domestic life, achieves a vast literary success without spoiling either her own or anyone else's happiness. Instead of tumult and struggle there is a sort of peace about this play, a touch of that salvation which Scott found in *The Antiquary*. It is as though Mr. Hay had set out for Armageddon and arrived at Cranford. The destination is pleasant, though scarcely the one intended.

Is *Hattie Stowe*, therefore, a success? That seems to put us back where we started. But not quite. For I shall answer, and the answer is yes.

It remains only to add that Miss Mary Ellis delightfully and delicately conducts Mrs. Stowe from obscurity to fame, and that the play is very cunningly staged.

12, WEDNESDAY. *The Eagle Has Two Heads*, at the Haymarket. M. Jean Cocteau's eloquent melodrama of a queen in love with death reaches Central London from Hammersmith by virtue of Miss Eileen Herlie's striking performance of the principal character, rather than by its own merits. Whatever successes are in store for Miss Herlie she is hardly likely to have this evening effaced from her memory. The house rose at her in a storm of applause, and it is no wonder that Miss Herlie was visibly moved by its enthusiasm.

13, THURSDAY. Two nights ago there was produced at the

Boltons Theatre, a new theatre club in South Kensington, William Douglas Home's *Now Barabbas* . . . This excellent play about prisons is sentimental in mood and in form scrappy; but in any five minutes of it there is more true feeling, there is more poetry, than in all M. Cocteau's thundering rhetoric.

Like Lancelot, it attains no icy perfection. For one thing, its author, Mr. William Douglas Home, has too kind a heart. Looking at prison walls, he sees sermons in stones; confronted with criminals, he finds good in everything. That excellent Tractarian, James Mozley, said that "a Christian is bound by his very creed to suspect evil, and cannot release himself. . . . He sees it where others do not; his instinct is divinely strengthened; his eye is supernaturally keen. . . . He owns the doctrine of original sin; that doctrine puts him necessarily on his guard against appearances . . . and prepares him for recognizing anywhere what he knows to be everywhere."

This is spirited writing, yet I don't know that we need accept it. But if we do, then Mr. Douglas Home is the least Christian of modern dramatists, just as, if we reject it, he is very nearly the most. Charity is written in blazing letters across this play from its first scene to its last. Mr. Douglas Home finds in his murderers, shoplifters, erring schoolmasters, bigamists, perverts, and swindlers more virtue than you would get in a normal bench of bishops; these ragged edges and sorry mountebanks of society show a truer love of literature, a more delicate appreciation of beauty and rhythm than you would run into at a combined meeting of the Book of the Month Club and the Poetry Society.

This is creditable to Mr. Douglas Home's generosity of temper, but I don't believe a word of it. Not one single word. In a pig-headed and paradoxical way I cling to the view that a man who is out of prison is likely to be more honest than one who is in. I hold the quaint notion that virtue, on the whole, is oftener found in the virtuous than in the vicious. Reactionary as I am, if I were engaging a housemaid I should not regard a girl who had committed murder as thereby having superior qualifications to one who hadn't.

If I cannot accept Mr. Douglas Home's interpretation of human nature, neither do I approve his technique. Many of

his scenes are hardly started before they are ended: he dashes hither and thither in his model prison, from the condemned cell to the exercise yard, from the common room to the visitors' entrance, with the restlessness of quicksilver. This hurried shifting of the point of view is called cinematic by those who believe that the world was created last Tuesday fortnight, though it was perfectly familiar to Shakespeare's early editors. But these are no gods of mine, and I find the rushing hither and yon very tough on my intellectual middle-aged spread.

Yet how richly rewarded that rushing is! One reaches the end of *Now Barabbas* . . . breathless; I dare say one gets to the top of Mont Blanc in pretty much the same condition. And among the foothills of the contemporary stage, Mr. Douglas Home's play is a veritable mountain; irregular in shape, no doubt, and pitted about with crevasses, but a thing of many lovelinesses, and, caught at the right angle, stretching out to the sublime.

This last especially in the scene in which young Tufnell, condemned to death for the murder of a policeman, waits for news of the result of his appeal. Hope rises high in his breast, and, for a few moments of extraordinary lyric beauty, rendered by Mr. Richard Longman with exquisite felicity, all the glory of the years he is snatching from the grave descends on him. Mr. Douglas Home draws Tufnell's portrait with a great, and, I think, mistaken tenderness; the dead policeman is too easily forgotten; but, despite this, I found it a beautiful and moving thing.

Tufnell's portrait, however, is only one among many. Mr. Douglas Home has the same tenderness for his Irish saboteur, whom, with Mr. Julian Somers's assistance, he sets singing with a magic, at once sullen and irresistible, that charms one's heart; for his Cockney thief, redeemed, not by a mother's love, but by his love for his mother; and for half a dozen other criminals. He is equally sympathetic to his warders, to his prison governor (played by Mr. Tristan Rawson with a calm and sensitive authority), and particularly to his prison chaplain, whom Mr. Anthony Marlowe lends a Welsh accent, charm, and eloquence. *Now Barabbas* . . . is a play that, though it excuses too much, understands a great deal. It is amusing and profoundly touching.

18, TUESDAY. Shaw's *In the Beginning*, at the Arts Theatre.

19, WEDNESDAY. Shaw's *Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas* and *The Thing Happens*. That Mr. Shaw is the first of living dramatists—this is as certain as that the sun will rise tomorrow, and a good deal more certain than that spring will be followed by summer. All the same, I don't yet feel that *Back to Methuselah*—of which the Arts has now presented rather more than half—is shaping into a masterpiece. But the end crowns all; call no man happy until he is dead; to which may be added, condemn no play as unsatisfactory till it is finished. Final judgment must wait upon the concluding instalments, which are to be given in the near future.

It is, however, already evident that Mr. Noel Willman is producing the play with a very heavy hand. Mr. Shaw is thought to consider *Back to Methuselah* to be his weightiest work; and Mr. Willman undoubtedly makes it seem so. He has schooled his cast to speak with a precise articulation that suggests the laws of the Medes and Persians being recited by a collection of conscientious foreigners. Mr. Adrian Cairns, first as Adam, and then as Franklyn Barnabas, and Mr. Michael Gwynn as the Archbishop of York, could give lessons in booming to the crack of doom. Due to this over-emphasis, and despite the fascinating and glittering snake of Miss Vivienne Bennett, the word-inventing scene in the Garden of Eden becomes unexpectedly dull. What might have had the charm of a "Just So" story is instead just so-so. Miss Barbara Lott as Savvy, in a laudable effort to introduce some liveliness into *The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas*, bounces so much that I was afraid she would disappear through the roof. On the other hand, Mr. Godfrey Kenton, as the classical and susceptible Lubin, is attractively and quietly civilized.

25, TUESDAY. *The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*, at the Arts Theatre. The Arts sometimes reminds one of the toy theatre that Chesterton had when a child. It was unable to cope with a modern dialogue about marriage, but could with the greatest ease present the Day of Judgment, thunderclaps and all. I have seen half a dozen players in a drawing-room

set at the Arts make the stage look rather more crowded than Wembley at a Cup Final. Yet in the fourth part of Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*, Miss Fanny Taylor and Mr. Michael Warre establish upon this pocket handkerchief a vast waste of sea and sky, and a flamboyance of soaring pillars. It is a striking achievement. Not often is so impressive a pictorial tune played upon a penny whistle.

But these clever people are let down by their author. Mr. Shaw here brings a party of ordinary mortals into contact with his long-livers, men and women whose three hundred years of life have given them a supply of wisdom hitherto unknown in the world. One of its characteristics, in which they take great pride, is that they no longer understand metaphors; another, that after three hundred years hope still triumphs over experience, for, in the climate of Great Britain, they wear a variation on the sun-inviting costumes of ancient Greece.

Faced with these long-livers, the Elderly Gentleman, the chief of the short-livers, at once recognizes that he has a great deal to say and only a short time to say it in. Coping with this difficulty, Mr. Geoffrey Dunn, in a flood and spate of words, pours out the familiar Shavian tirades (very amusing still) about the British Empire and the stupidity of the English and the destruction of London with an immense peevish energy. At his back Time's winged chariot hurries after him, but it throbs in vain behind his fleeter tongue. As the Oracle, Miss Frances Rowe has a just impressiveness. But not all the skill lavished on it conceals the fact that *Back to Methuselah*, in its present stage, seems to be approaching the anecdotal instead of the apocalyptic.

26, WEDNESDAY. *The Beautiful People*, at the Mercury Theatre. Mr. William Saroyan's *The Beautiful People* is a poetic drama; and it is written in prose.

That, however, doesn't worry me. No one has ever succeeded in satisfactorily defining poetry. We can say little more than that, wherever the form, beauty, arrangement, rhythm of words release a feeling that is beyond the actual meaning of the words themselves, the spirit of poetry is likely

to be present. The form of verse very often assists in this release; but not always: nor is it invariably necessary.

Let me illustrate by two quotations that have some bearing upon aspects of the theme that Mr. Saroyan seeks to develop in *The Beautiful People*. Mr. Saroyan's play is imbued with a sense of the unity of men and animals; mice as much as human beings are the children of God, and as such have certain inalienable rights; among them, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. With James Montgomery Mr. Saroyan would declare:

God made all his creatures free;  
Life itself is liberty.

Now, from my youth upwards I have been familiar with those lines as part of a hymn, and I feel for them both respect and affection. But though they are in verse, I cannot in them recognize the poetic spirit. They convey no feeling beyond what they actually say.

A second aspect of *The Beautiful People* is its gentle contempt for Carlyle's gospel of work, for that getting and that spending which lay waste our powers. Its scene is an old house in the sunset district of San Francisco; and its characters—Agnes Webster, with her possessed love of all things living, her father, Jonah Webster, full of scientific oaths ("parallels and paralaxes") and her brother Owen, perpetually talking of the books he is writing (books that each contain a single word only)—have long got past the stage of working a five-day week. And why not? "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." The Websters, too, have a tentative glory of their own. But the point I want to make is that here in this verse of St. Matthew's, we have one of the themes of *The Beautiful People* expressed in the loftiest poetry; though in phrases of English prose.

I don't mind, then, this play's being in prose; not if the spirit of poetry is present in it. But is it? I could answer with more certainty if the piece were not so baffling. I admit to a mild puzzlement when the curtain rises, and reveals a hat bracket on the wall of a room, and on that hat bracket there is

perched an ordinary kitchen chair. Nor does a flash of illumination cross my mind when a young man enters, wearing a top hat, a sweater, and a pair of grey shorts, and proceeds to jump on to the lid of a piano, and shout at a bust of Shakespeare, "What have they got in New York? Mice? We've got mice here." There is a cornet that can be heard three thousand miles away; and a vice-president who carries a red squeaker to remind him of a trip to Mexico: and much is heard of a youth whose shoes do not fit: and at the end another youth appears who has never been referred to before, and is in fact entirely silent; nowhere, in fact, is the play as simple as the A B C.

Yet if you do not weary of the slow pace of Mr. Robert Henderson's production in the first act; if you do not care whether the piece means anything or not; if you sit back and just let the whole thing happen to you; if you forget that you are a reasonable being to whom the quantum theory is child's play: if you can do all this, and keep awake, then I think that towards the end *The Beautiful People* does have some of poetry's queer excitement. It has it when Mr. Robert Speaight as Jonah speaks the long explanation that almost gives the play lucidity; it has it in the look of raptness and of rapture that Miss Dorothy Gordon gives to Agnes; it has it every time one hears the distant notes of the cornet; and most of all in the strangely moving ending when the unknown youth appears, and the lost brother strides happily and magnificently down the theatre's central aisle, blowing ever loudly and more loudly still, till the house shakes with the triumphant melody.

27, THURSDAY. *Variety* at the Palladium. Mr. George Formby is a considerable artist. His assumption of character is perfect. In his natty gent's seaside wear, he is the apotheosis of the good-natured Lancashire youth who, fancying himself as knowing as Max Miller, is really as innocent as Mr. Toots. His harmless improprieties, sung to the ukulele at a speed that may be underestimated because it is so unhurried, enchant, but also a little frighten him. His broad smile and that gulping laugh cover the confusion of a man who is delightedly appalled at his own daring.



## MARCH 1947

3, MONDAY. *Caviar to the General*, at the Whitehall Theatre. "Why is America so fine a country?" asks the Russian woman-general. "Because it's full of Americans," replies the American business man. This thought-provoking observation is spoken by Mr. John McLaren with a naturalness and an ease not apparent in the rest of the performance. Even Miss Eugenie Leontovich's Tanya seems only an uncertain sketch.

4, TUESDAY. *As Far as Thought Can Reach*, at the Arts Theatre.

5, WEDNESDAY. *Truant in Park Lane*, at the St. James's Theatre. Bodies are terribly important. The handsome and dead Lord Lyndon caused only embarrassment and trouble by getting himself—not to put too fine a point on it—reissued as a stocky chess-playing tobacconist from Shepherd's Bush. The right parcel, but in the wrong box, he would have been very roughly handled except for the exquisite and wary courtesy with which Dame Lilian Braithwaite, as the widowed countess, takes charge of an unusual situation. Dame Lilian has, in fact, rather better control of this than the author, Mr. James Parish, whose resources are exhausted by the first two amusing acts before he gets to the spiritualistic séance of the third. The drably metamorphosed earl is wittily played by Mr. Roland Young. "Can a ghost laugh, or shake his gaunt sides, when you are pleasant with him?" Had he seen Mr. Young, Lamb would hardly have been so sceptical.

6, THURSDAY. *The White Devil*, at the Duchess Theatre. "Fair as the leprosy, dazzling as the lightning"—that is how Hazlitt

described Vittoria Corombona; and Mr. Michael Benthall, who has directed *The White Devil*, has borne these words in mind to the extent of at least three-quarters.

It would be merely a quibble to point out that Miss Margaret Rawlings is not fair but dark: for she has toned her performance of Vittoria to a whiteness of complexion that would have left Hazlitt entirely satisfied. Southern suns have not brought into her cheeks any tinge or flush of colour; they suggest instead the whiteness of polar wastes, were not these associated with snow, and snow with purity; and the whiteness of Vittoria is the whiteness of corruption, the evil whiteness that terrified Melville, more horrible than all the redness that affrights in blood.

Hence in the trial scene, in which Vittoria is accused of murdering her husband and of instigating the Duke of Brachiano to kill his wife, we get from Miss Rawlings none of that "innocence-resembling boldness," no hint of that "gay confidence" which some people discover in her. Vittoria here, it is true, indignantly resents the accusations of incontinence that Mr. Hugh Griffith rolls with such a bitter pleasure upon Cardinal Monticelso's tongue. But the indignation does not proceed from even the appearance of innocence. It is harsh and railing. It is the angry frustration, the exasperated rage of the swindler who, caught in the very act of falsifying his income-tax returns, nevertheless, human nature being what it is, strongly objects to being called a thief. And in this, I think, Miss Rawlings is right. There is in Vittoria a sincerity in her sense of guilt that makes her contemptuous assertion of innocence only a plainly formal move in a game of ill-tempered matching of wits. It does not deceive; and it is not really intended to do so.

And the lightning? Mr. Benthall punctuates his production with stabs and flashes of electricity. But what we get in fullest measure is not lightning, but lightning's slower brother, thunder. This play is presented at the Duchess in an atmosphere of storm. Behind every other line, at least in the first half of the performance, there is the crack and rattle of aerial commotion and disturbance, now receding, now advancing, and at times appearing to leap from off the stage into the middle of

the auditorium, where it springs up from beneath our seats and simultaneously explodes over our heads. The scene of this play of exalted adultery and ducal murder is Italy; but an Italy on which the sun never shines; Padua and Rome differ not at all, in climate at any rate, from Shakespeare's blasted heath.

The players are stimulated by this to a prodigious vocal exertion. A couple of assassins, isolated by a lurid shaft of limelight on a darkened stage, begin the performance with a tremendous clatter and din. Almost before the curtain has gone properly up, the play strikes twelve all at once; which may be a good thing in some ways, but has this disadvantage, that it leaves no scope for a crescendo. The performance has thus to be tuned to a perpetual climax. Now Webster writes very finely; but at this point I am reminded of a better piece of writing than will be found either in *The White Devil* or *The Duchess of Malfi*. It is about a great and strong wind, an earthquake and a fire; but the Lord was not in any of these things; and after them, a still small voice. Mr. Benthall should have remembered the still small voice, as well as the lightning and the leprosy.

Once, in fact, he does remember it; and the result is quite startling. But first I must speak of Mr. Robert Helpmann's Flamineo, the dark and greased Iago who sets the plot in motion and is ever-ready to give it a helping push into further blood and lechery. Mr. Helpmann's costume, which has some of ballet's indiscretion, gives him the only quality he conspicuously lacks, which is height: though he occasionally allows the beauty of his voice to obscure the meaning of what he says. He is finest in posture and movement, as when he shrinks from his mother's dagger.

Now for the point. Flamineo has murdered his brother, and his mother, repenting her sudden anger, offers to the assembled lords and ruffians who compose the play's cast an explanation that lets him out. Then, treading on silence, a page, whom I had not noticed before, and was not to notice again, quietly says these five words: "This is not true, madam." That is all. As this play counts noise, it is hardly more than a whisper. Am I right in thinking that the name of the actor who plays the page is not even mentioned on the programme? Yet for

me it was the most striking moment in a performance in which such moments are not few.

One sentence at least in what I wrote about this play flew unerringly to its mark. For it provoked the following letter:

DEAR MR. HAROLD HOBSON,

As you wrote of the most striking moment in *The White Devil* being the few words that I spoke at that time, I was vastly thrilled to read your very entertaining and just notice. I've yet to find whether one's name is or is not on the programme, but whether or not, I assure you, as one who has few chances to do more than dash about the stage and alter his clothes to fit in, what you said about those few words was more than welcome to

Yours very sincerely,

PATRICK MACNEE

Whether Mr. Macnee has a great future upon the stage remains to be seen. If not, he should consider taking up diplomacy.

7, FRIDAY. *Romany Love*, at His Majesty's Theatre. It would be easy to find fault with *Romany Love*. Anthropologists going to it for an authentic picture of gipsy life will be disappointed: it lacks the spirit of *Lavengro*. Victor Herbert's music, though tuneful as is Apollo's lute, has a reminiscent air. The show is not original. The whole thing, in fact, is less Borrow than borrowed. Nevertheless, this entertainment gives me more hope for the future of musical comedy in England than anything I have seen for a long time.

Consider the position. A distinguished English actor, recently returned after twelve years in America, told me a few days ago that since 1939 the London stage has done wonders. Broadly speaking, this is true. An abundance of new talent has been showered upon us in the serious theatre. I will give merely a few instances that could easily be multiplied. New dramatists like Mr. Ustinov, Mr. Burden, and Mr. Home, have put forth more than the first tentative shoots of quality. An actress whom I had never seen before but certainly wish to see again—Miss Isabel Dean—presented to us in Mr. Gielgud's *Midsummer Night's Dream* a Hermia that was as spirited and sharply defined as she was lovely. At the Old Vic a young

player has recently given such performances that I, a confirmed passenger on the water-wagon, can now, for the first time in my life, echo with sincerity, "Guinness is good for you."

A new director of talent has emerged in Mr. Peter Ashmore, whose production of *The Master Builder* excited me, even if I did not understand it; and anyone who drops in at the Savoy will see that young Mr. Anthony Holland is a brilliant designer of stage settings.

Familiar talent has developed: we have watched the steep rise of Mr. Olivier; and old talent has been rediscovered, in the ravishing of our ears with such magic-haunting phrases as

Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle: she died young;

and,

I think not so; her infelicity  
Seem'd to have years too many;

and,

I am i' th' way to study a long silence.

Nor has the lighter stage failed. Can we forget Miss Judy Campbell singing about that snobbish nightingale, in that attractively hoarse voice, and the dewy freshness of that lifted white ball dress? Has not the gargoyle genius of Miss Hermione Gingold sprouted into new and enchanting monstrosities?

But the glory of the lighter theatre begins and ends with revue. Since 1939 musical comedy has been either in eclipse, or (with the exception of the productions of my adored Hulberts) only a parody of its former self; a parody, moreover, that has been drab, second-hand, down-at-heel, dilapidated, and shop-soiled. Musicals have been presented in the West End with old, faded, discoloured, crumpled scenery; with dresses as stale in appearance as they were garish in taste; with every adjunct of third-rate provincial pantomime. During the war this may have been necessary. But it has happened since the war finished. Whenever I am feeling depressed, a show called *Can-Can* comes into my mind—but as my friend Mr. Agate recalls in the eighth brilliant volume of his *Ego*, Stevenson

adjures us that a man should stop his ears against paralysing terror. I will therefore forget *Can-Can*.

And remember *Romany Love*. Here is a show in which the costumes are a froth and foam of newness; they rustle and they glitter; the leader of that bolero dance is gowned in an enchantment of yellow; the sailor-hatted maidens of 1900 remind us that such things were as were most pleasant to us; and the scenery, too (though I believe it was used in New York) has a freshness upon it. The curving line of the white *château* disappearing into the cool green distance of the baron's garden in the second scene is delightful. *Romany Love*, a trifling story of a gipsy girl who makes a marquess fall in love with her, but prefers her Romany lover, has the quality of elegance.

It may not be a particularly valuable quality. But a quality that ranks low in the scale of merit can, in certain circumstances, be essential. A light touch in a heavyweight fight may get its possessor no further than the floor; but who can bake pastry without it? Without elegance a musical comedy is nothing.

*Romany Love*, handicapped though it be by its trite story, has other virtues: the comedic skill, the beautiful repose of Mr. Melville Cooper: the fine singing of Miss Helena Bliss, Mr. Eric Starling, and Mr. George Britton: and the vivacity of Miss Kaye Connor. It encourages the desire to see other New York musicals. I believe we are to have *Oklahoma!* at Drury Lane. Good. And cannot we have *Annie Get Your Gun*? Cannot we have *Bloomer Girl*?

But please let them be elegant.

This opinion seems to have caused some mental commotion in Shropshire. A letter from that charming coloured county declares that I say some "very rude things" about musical plays produced in London since 1939. Then it demands, "Do these ruderies apply to Ivor's *Perchance to Dream*?" If not, the writer thinks it would have been fairer to say so. "I cannot," he goes on, "imagine the remarks—old, faded, discoloured, drab, second-hand, down at heel, dilapidated, shop-soiled—applying to this production."

Nor, for the matter of that, can I.

18, THURSDAY. *The Anonymous Lover*, at the Duke of York's Theatre. Was it her husband Clive who crept into Marion's bedroom just after midnight? Or was it the henpecked dramatist who had made her the chief character in his latest play? That is the question by which Marion was troubled; and only the sense of discipline that comes easy to those born in Sheffield led me to stay for her answer.

The author, Mr. Vernon Sylvaine, quotes Keats (and gets him wrong); may I, therefore, quote Gibbon (and try to get him right)? "To touch the heart by an interesting story, is the end of tragedy; to please our curiosity . . . by a faithful representation of manners, is the purpose of comedy. To excite laughter is the sole, and contemptible, aim of farce." Thus spoke the historian of the Roman Empire. *The Anonymous Lover*, then, is a farce; and for me not even the devoted labours of Miss Valerie Taylor, Miss Ambrosine Phillpotts, Mr. Hugh Sinclair, and Mr. Raymond Huntley made it funny.

18, TUESDAY. *The Three-Cornered Hat*, at Covent Garden Opera House. A busman's holiday at Covent Garden produced, a few days later, this summing-up of *Back to Methuselah*:

Mr. Bernard Shaw's five-part cycle is now bowling along merrily at the Arts. By a quick course of intensive playgoing it is possible to see the entire history of the human race, present, past, and future, from just after protoplasm to just before the millennium, interpreted by the most resilient and witty of living dramatists. From the back of beyond to the Ultima Thule, from *In the Beginning* to *As Far as Thought Can Reach*—it is an immense journey; and a good deal of luggage has to be discarded by the way. Along with the Rider Haggards and the Ethel M. Dells, war, pestilence, and famine, jealousy, and democracy and love, metaphors, literature, and emotion, with the thousands of other things that make our life to-day, and have made it for as long as the memory of man goeth not to the contrary, vanish John Webster and *The White Devil*.

I am mindful of this because a fortnight ago I remarked that to me the most impressive moment in the performance of *The White Devil* at the Duchess was provided by a young actor

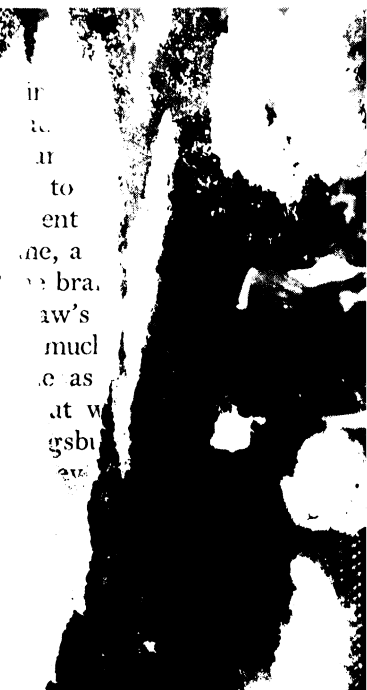


Alec Clunes as Iago and  
Jack Hawkins as Othello.  
At the Piccadilly, Iago was  
played by Anthony Quayle.

(*Arts Theatre*)

Geoffrey Keen, Fay  
Compton and Jack Hawkins  
in *Candida*

(*Piccadilly Theatre*)



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But to argue the hind leg off a dog isn't quite the same thing as to convince him. The dog may lose his leg and retain his opinion. In fact, in *As Far as Thought Can Reach* Mr. Shaw, the master of paradox, gives the impression of being paradox-trapped. What is he trying to prove? That the emotions are a discarded foolishness; that art, which appeals to them, is useless. How does he try to prove it? By the resources of his art.

Surely there is something odd here. His Ancients, unfolding their scorn of poetry and music, are musicians and poets in half the words they utter. They are mathematicians proving by mathematics that mathematics don't exist. All through the performance at the Arts the words of Macbeth made a mournful music in my ears:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death.

Mr. Shaw is indeed like this Macbeth, declaring in cadences of undying ugliness that nowhere in life is there any loveliness at all. Every argument Mr. Shaw brings forward is contradicted by the overtones of the phrase. As Miss Vivienne expresses it,

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## THEATRE

media they understand. He says in effect: 'I think this kind of thing is rubbish, but only by talking in this way can I persuade you that there is something more important to seek.' Legitimate, surely? As legitimate as the blood and thunder of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* and *Lear*."

This is clever and courteous. Yet I hardly think Mr. Appleby is right. In the first place, Shakespeare does not use blood and thunder in, say, *Macbeth*, in order to prove that blood and thunder will presently be outmoded. Macbeth is not given the virtues of the soldier in order to establish the superiority of pacifism. Shakespeare does not invent witches in order to prove that evil spirits do not exist. He points the way to better things by showing us some glimpses of what those better things are: the music of

Duncan is in his grave,  
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;  
Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,  
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing  
Can touch him further.

The pathos of

My way of life  
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have.

The argument that you must give to people what you think is wrong because that is the only thing they can understand always seems to me to be dangerous. It has been used to justify persecution both in the past and in our own day. Burn the heretics, say the intolerant: they understand nothing but faggots and the fire. Is Shaw, believing that beauty and poetry are childish things, yet providing them because audiences can appreciate nothing better, essentially different from the manager who gives leg shows for the same reason?

25, TUESDAY. *Birthmark*, at the Embassy Theatre. When Valmond came to Pontiac he brought a good deal of trouble

with him. Indeed, in novels and on the stage, intrusive strangers, from Hilda Wangel to Mr. Pim (who passed by) have a habit of being a disturbing influence. Certainly the mysterious, the pretty, the Nordic, the so decidedly sullen Wanda, who turned up one summer morning at Mrs. Petworth's seaside home with a baby and a perambulator, did not add to the peace and calm of that amiable household.

Rarely in a play can an infant have been made the subject of such sensational speculations as fly round the sleeping head of Wanda's extraordinarily good-tempered child in A. R. Rawlinson's *Birthmark*. Is this baby potentially and politically an atomic bomb, or only a storm in a teacup? Is it Mrs. Petworth's grandson, or the offspring of the Führer himself?

The Petworth household is thrown into a ferment of excitement by these fantastic questions. Mrs. Petworth, who has been mourning the death of her son in the war, and finding comfort in the unexpected appearance of his widow and child, is, like Othello, "perplexed in the extreme." Her nephew, Gerald Dartle, who gives much publicity to his employment in the Secret Service, discovers on his own doorstep, as it were, a problem more fascinating than anything he had professionally run up against in Berlin. His father and his mother, respectively, find Wanda silky and sulky.

They gather round the infant's pram. They gaze at its eyes, they examine its hand. They make queer noises at it; they look at it with rapture, with doubt, with horror, with wonder and with alarm. Is it their own flesh and blood? Is it, can it be, the beginning of a Hitler legend on the scale of the Napoleonic legend, and with perhaps far worse consequences? They wander round it in a circle of fascinated questions; and all the time the infant goes on calmly sleeping, sleeping, always sleeping, supremely indifferent to the interest it is arousing, a superb example of soporific good manners.

The audience does not share the baby's lethargy. For *Birthmark*, though its story, as I have told it, may stretch credulity to the farthest limit, does not strain it too far for comfort. Mr. Rawlinson, without writing with any particular brilliance, manages to make his tale convincing; and for the space of a couple of hours the audience willingly enough (or

those members of it who have not read Mr. Trevor Roper's *Last Days of Hitler*) accepts his account of what happened in the ruins of Berlin half an hour before the Russians overran it. It shares the distress and wonder of the people on the stage, and waits with eager impatience for the riddle to be solved.

How, why, or if that solution is reached I will not say. I will content myself with remarking that at the end Mr. Rawlinson adopts the tactics of John Van Druten in *Nobody Knows* and of J. B. Priestley in *Laburnum Grove*. And what better models could a dramatist find?

The play is well acted, with Louise Hampton in the role of Mrs. Petworth. Miss Hampton has a pleasing line in anxious melancholy; she is the Zasu Pitts of the stage. But she has no similar holding in the joy of life; and her differentiation of Mrs. Petworth radiant and Mrs. Petworth gloomy has the violent contrast of Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

26, WEDNESDAY. *Othello*, at the Piccadilly Theatre. The greatest Othellos seen on the English stage were Salvini and Edmund Kean. At the "supreme moment" of his performance Salvini used to cut "his throat with a short scimitar, hacking and hewing with savage energy, and imitating the noise that escaping blood and air may together make when the windpipe is severed." Kean's Othello was the product of a different spirit. For instance, the greatest of all farewells to arms he spoke in tones that "struck on the heart like the swelling notes of some divine music, like the sound of years of departed happiness." Between this beauty and that horror, where does Mr. Jack Hawkins stand?

During the first act at the Piccadilly, it is not easy to answer the question. It is indeed plain that Mr. Hawkins is to present a barbaric Othello, an Othello with all a savage's love of gaudy colours and finery. His robes have the flaunting, blinding hues of the fairground: everybody wears earrings, but Othello's earrings are the biggest and brightest of the lot. Yet poetry and beauty, though a quality, are not necessarily a product of civilization; they may come as easily from the simple peoples as from the super-subtle: perhaps more easily. Mr. Hawkins's

appearance may suggest the barbaric in this first act, but it is going too far to deduce also the brutish.

One does not, in fact, until Iago begins to pour into Othello's ear the first suspicions of jealousy, deduce anything at all. For it is hard at first to fasten one's mind on this Othello: partly because he is kept dodging on and off the stage in semi-darkness; but more because of the instant excellence of Mr. Anthony Quayle's Iago. Mr. Quayle's mouth-wiping, nose-scratching Iago was not born in Venice; the polish of the cities is not on him; he wears a rough jerkin, and his manner is not smooth, either; he is a stubborn scheming country lad who has come into Venice from the fields lying beyond the canals and the piazzas; when he takes his leave of Cassio there is something of contempt in his voice, but also in his "Good night, lieutenant," a touch of the rustic's awe at a fine gentleman. This is a very notable performance.

It develops too. Mr. Quayle's Iago is not an easy master of his plots and villainies. For one thing, his imagination is too vivid, and his nature too hot for comfort: he inflames himself as well as Othello by his lechery of thought. For another, his intrigues tax and weary his brain. Till near the end he can appear fresh, resourceful and frank with Othello, Roderigo, or Cassio; but when he is alone there are moments at which he comes close to fainting. Had not Othello been swift in action, here is an Iago who would not have stayed the course.

It is from the handkerchief scene onwards that Mr. Hawkins marks out clearly the way that he is going. A brilliantly robed figure, he delivers the "Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars" speech standing on the battlements of Cyprus, looking out over the sea that sunders him from Venice, where he had been happy and in peace of heart. This is visually fine. But it is not matched by any particular pathos of voice: we have here no swelling notes of divine music. What Mr. Hawkins is at pains to show is the torture of Othello's mind, not the glory in which it found expression.

In the early reaches of the play Mr. Hawkins has been an affable Othello: he has smiled continuously. The smiles are gone now; he paces the stage angrily, perplexed; his limbs

shake in rage as well as in epilepsy; his gaze is fixed and frightening. His suspicions grow in an increasing torment, and he attains his best effects, not in any of the supreme speeches, but in a wild shriek of "Blood, blood, blood"; and in the gesture with which, in Desdemona's bedchamber, he flings money at Emilia and degrades his home into a brothel. Mr. Hawkins stops short, far short, of Salvini's last brutality; and also, it must be said, of Salvini's power; but he is on Salvini's side, not Kean's.

There are several admirable performances in a production that Mr. Peter Powell has directed with fire and spirit. Miss Elizabeth Kentish's Desdemona is dewily innocent, but escapes insipidity; Mr. Geoffrey Keen's Cassio, though small in scale, is beautifully timed and spoken; and Mr. Ivan Staff should be especially commended. His Roderigo is easily scared, but he has spirit in him.

27, THURSDAY. *Candida*, at the Piccadilly Theatre. Is *Candida* Mr. Shaw's best play, or is it only the exquisite performance of Miss Fay Compton that makes it seem so? Mr. Shaw has never written a better speech than that in which Candida talks of those little, nameless, unremembered acts by which a self-sufficient man's wife or mother enables him to burgeon and to glory before an admiring world. The "divine music" was absent from *Othello*; but had Hazlitt been in the theatre to-night, and heard Miss Compton, seated before the fire, speak those lines with such quiet beauty, with such tender playfulness, then English dramatic criticism would by now have been enriched with a phrase that would make Miss Compton's name last as long as Edmund Kean's, and until her loveliness is only a legend emptied of concern.

## APRIL 1947

1, TUESDAY. These productions of *Candida* and *Othello* overshadowed everything else for the time being, and I am still thinking about them to-day.

I feel I have not sufficiently praised Mr. Hawkins's Morell in *Candida*; a good-humoured, bull-necked performance that is adding greatly to the effect of one of the most delightful entertainments in London. Mr. Hawkins is an actor whom I always see with pleasure. I have never known him altogether to fail yet; and if his *Othello* on alternate nights is no miracle, it is no worse than any other *Othello* I have seen.

I have in fact begun despairingly to wonder whether *Othello* is not beyond the compass of an actor. Against this perhaps emotional scepticism, the result of great hopes repeatedly blasted, Hazlitt, of course, can be appealed to. Hazlitt declared that Kean's *Othello* was not only the greatest of his performances, but that it was, as well, the highest effort of genius on the stage.

Presumably, therefore, *Othello can* be played. Yet—nothing in my experience of the theatre makes Hazlitt's statement seem probable. Hazlitt's fine phrases are all very well; but something inside me demands, Give me the ocular proof. Up to now, no one has given me either ocular proof, or auricular. I have never seen an *Othello* who affrighted and dominated the eye; I have never heard an *Othello* who melted my heart within me. Do such *Othellos* exist? In spite of Hazlitt, *can* they?

The two greatest actors in our theatre have never attempted *Othello*; and one of them assures me that he never will attempt it. The part requires, he says, a man of enormous

physique. It is a bass part; the great speeches are arias for a Chaliapine: he himself has a tenor voice. An actor who was a very fine Iago has specified to me the same requirements: Othello must have a giant's body, and a voice that rumbles in the bowels of the earth. Have we such an actor in London to-day?

Perhaps not; yet I cannot admit the necessity. The body may help the performance, but I don't believe it can ever ruin it. The most moving of Madam Butterflies was a lady of extreme proportions. Garrick was a tiny man, but he could terrify people out of their wits. There is, however, no need to go beyond our terms of reference. The only Englishman who is said to have greatly succeeded as Othello is Edmund Kean; and Kean was a small man and his voice was hoarse.

So I remarked to the second actor I have mentioned, and he immediately said a striking thing. "Yes," he demanded, "but what was Kean's Iago like?"

I have thought a good deal over that retort, and I am inclined to wonder whether it may not indicate the true answer to the problem. In the first act as played at the Piccadilly Theatre, Othello has two considerable moments: when he delivers his speech to the Senate about his wooing of Desdemona, and when he stills the brawl in the streets with the astounding "Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them."

Do not let us underrate these opportunities; but, eminent as they are, Iago's are greater. What is more, Iago is kept constantly before the audience's eye. It is he who sets the plot in motion, and controls the action. The play is, in fact, for a long while, not about Othello, but about Iago. True, the balance swings in the other direction later. But, *always provided that you have a good Iago*, is it not then too late? Has not Iago got too long a start? Othello is a slow beginner, and before he can get the audience's attention, he has to capture it from someone else. The better that other person is, the less likely is it that Othello will succeed.

Would our Othellos, then, be better if our Iagos were worse? Has Shakespeare here written a play of which the effect is greatest when one of the chief characters is less than perfectly played? And, if so, is this a defect in craftsmanship?



My estimates of *Othello* provoked a wider response than any other piece of criticism I have written. For one thing, Jimmie didn't like my views on Iago at all. Always very generous in praise, he had given me a great deal of encouragement in the past: but this time his patience was worn out. I never discovered why. I only know that they irritated him so much that when he was questioned about them, beyond saying that in his opinion they were unbelievably wrong, he lapsed into gloomy silence, a most unusual condition for one so chatty as Jimmie. Also, they brought in more than fifty letters to the *Sunday Times* office: these letters continued to pour in week after week, until at the end correspondents had forgotten what it was that originally started the avalanche. Most of them were from playgoers who contested my assertion that no one has on our contemporary stage played *Othello* as he should be played. More than a dozen people put up the name of Godfrey Tearle, and from what they say of him I am bound to regret my never having seen this fine actor in the part. Two suggested Paul Robeson; someone else proposed Hubert Carter, declaring that he had a voice like the Bull of Bashan, and was so strong that he could lift a man up by his own hair; and there was a minority opinion in favour of Baliol Holloway. Finally, George Richards ("categorically, but not dogmatically") contributed "a complete, inclusive, and exhaustive list of actors . . . who can legitimately be called great to-day; Emil Jannings (if still alive), Harry Baur, Will Fyffe, Godfrey Tearle, Frederick Valk (except in Shakespeare), Oscar Homolka, Fritz Kortner, Edgar K. Bruce (whom you wouldn't know about, since apart from Shaftesbury Avenue, Piccadilly, and the Haymarket, you do not 'get about'), several original members of the Abbey Theatre Company (for example, the late F. J. McCormick), John Laurie (who has achieved greatness at least once, as *Othello* at Stratford in '39 particularly), Walter Huston, and (most emphatically) Thomas Mitchell."

An impressive and lengthy list? In Richards's opinion, no; for, with characteristic spirit, he writes: "One's complaint against the present age is not that it fails so unfailingly to produce great men . . . nor that those which it does manage to produce are, on the first available pretext, hurriedly elbowed

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into innocuous retirement. No, what stamps our epoch as not merely passively infecund and barren of talent, but as incurably pusillanimous, paltry, puny, mean, and *mesquin* beyond parallel is the current insidious attack on standards. Criteria are themselves in question and the currency itself debased."

2, WEDNESDAY. *The Animal Kingdom*, at the Playhouse. This is an American comedy in which married love isn't hallowed, and the other sort is. Mr. Frank Lawton, as the young publisher who leaves his wife for his mistress, gaily and impulsively shows that a man may cut a poor figure in the divorce court, and yet be well-meaning, honest, and good; this is a spirited and attractive performance. Mr. Niall MacGinnis's butler (in this play's menagerie the affable, un-class-conscious elephant) is also charming. Miss Elizabeth Allan and Miss Renée Asherson are respectively the wife and mistress: the gilt that glitters and the gold that doesn't. Against these assets are to be set a lack of substance, a failure to see the strong as well as the weak points of respectability, and an irritating indirectness of dialogue. It is off-culture in the sense that decoration used to be off-white; if it wants to say anything, it says something different, and stops before the sentence is finished.

5, SATURDAY. Yesterday came to Stratford for the opening performance of Sir Barry Jackson's second Festival season. Last night saw the dress rehearsal of *Romeo and Juliet*, and to-night its first presentation. It began with Mr. John Harrison's tranquil and musical speaking of the prologue. Moving slowly across a stage darkened in grey midnight mists, which later were dispersed by the hot, dry blaze of the Verona sun, Mr. Harrison hung upon the air sweet sorrow's silver sounds. It was an auspicious beginning to a production, directed by Mr. Peter Brook, which never lost sight of the fact that fine verse should be finely spoken.

I have never, for example, heard the Queen Mab speech so excitingly delivered. Mr. Paul Scofield's Mercutio has little gaiety, but at this point his gravity is richly rewarding. It is gravity moonstruck: he is a Mercutio who really has seen the

fairies and wishes, perhaps, that he had not. Had Romeo here slipped into another play, murmuring, "Look, how our partner's rapt," he could hardly have been blamed.

Mr. Robert Harris's Escalus, Mr. Walter Hudd's Capulet, precise and pettish, and Miss Beatrix Lehmann's crack-voice nurse, with her shuffling rheumatic walk, are all commendable; and there is a splendid scurry about the fighting in the sweating streets, with Mercutio killed by as foul a stroke as ever the Master of Ballantrae attempted.

Now, having distributed my small change of praise, what larger coin have I for Romeo and Juliet? Alas, my purse is almost empty.

Mr. Laurence Payne's Romeo is young, darkly Italian, excellently spoken in the quieter passages, but unmelting in passion, and hampered by lack of inches.

Miss Daphne Slater's Juliet, too, is young. At her first appearance, sitting on the nurse's knee, she looks, in her blue nightgown, like a little girl. Her best scene is that of her terror before taking the sleeping-draught; she seems genuinely frightened. But, though Juliet was barely fourteen, her part is not to be found in a child's garden of verses.

8, TUESDAY. *Here, There, and Everywhere*, at the Palladium. A lavishly staged and uninhibited revue based on the travels of Mr. Tommy Trinder.

9, WEDNESDAY. *Volpone*, at the Savoy Theatre. I have rarely seen Mr. Wolfitt give a better performance than he did last Wednesday in this play of engineers hoist and cozeners cozened. In his representation of the miser and mountebank who pretends illness in order to squeeze presents out of his expectant heirs, there is a flamboyance, a self-rejoicing, exuberant and chuckling delight, that matches the gaily corrupted eloquence of a piece which, if it resembles a catalogue of diseases, a doctor's dictionary, is nevertheless a considerable work. *Volpone* has the teeming life of worms in a rotting corpse, and Mr. Wolfitt plays it with all the fifty-seven kinds of relish.

10, THURSDAY. *Call Home the Heart*, at the St. James's Theatre.

This play's main drive is at the heart. The perplexity and complexity of human relationships are translated with a kind of gentle relentlessness into terms of a middle-class English family in which love has died between the father and mother, who are now held together only by force of habit, and in which the daughter knows not how or where or what she loves, or what is reality or what illusion. Fussed, interfering, and unloved, Dame Sybil Thorndike gives a sharp reality to the mother, a peevish Martha in a play that has no Mary; and Miss Valerie White brings her blanched and beautiful tenseness to the part of the distressed, distraught, and shell-shocked daughter.

15, TUESDAY. *The Play's the Thing*, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. No, it isn't. It's the player, or rather two players—Mr. Clive Brook in the first act, and Mr. Michael Shepley in the second. Mr. Shepley is overheard by his enraged fiancée making love to a pretty actress in the midst of marble halls and a gilded palace. Whereupon Mr. Brook, recalling that Hamlet confirmed suspicion by having a play acted, here allays it by writing another, through which it appears that Mr. Shepley's indiscretion was only part of the rehearsal of a charity entertainment.

An artificial theme? Certainly, and played by Mr. Brook with artifice immense and gratifying. That Mr. Brook has grace and distinction I have long known; but I was not aware that he had such entrancing humour as he now displays. I have thought him as handsome as a Greek statue; and as emotionless. I was wrong—though not about his looks. His performance at the Lyric is as airy as Tennyson's Lilian; it makes thistledown feel like lead. It has style. It is the eighteenth century resurrected: Lord Chesterfield's *Letters* in Basic English: a minuet danced in a dinner jacket. Mr. Shepley's actor is earthier, robuster stuff, burgeoning in vanity and exasperation, delightfully comic. If the author's wit had equalled the players', what an evening this would have been!

What an evening it was too! Molnar's comedy finished early, round about nine o'clock. On our way to the Ivy, just at nine-fifteen, we were passing in front of Olympia, and my

chauffeur, Harry Cole, turned on his wireless so that we could hear the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, speak on the Budget he had introduced to the Commons earlier in the day. Precisely as Dalton's first words floated over the air, the driving-column of the car shot through the floor. The car slewed across the road, in front of a bus, but Harry Cole, with quite remarkable skill, brought it to a gentle stop at the pavement edge. The whole thing was done so calmly that, except for the eccentric crossing of the road, I shouldn't have guessed that anything unusual was happening.

The play itself had its mishaps. It ran for a long time in New York purely (if that is the right word) on the strength of a passage in the passionate address delivered off-stage by the character represented in London by Michael Shepley. This character, with rising excitement, spoke in America of taking a bite out of something round and smooth and luscious. The obvious reference to the lady's breast was too much for the Lord Chamberlain. Clive Brook tells me that this official insisted that all "geographical and cannibalistic" details should be omitted from the English performance, as indeed they are. This involves sacrificing the play's chief ingenuity, for the question that leaps into the audience's mind is how can the amateur dramatist put an innocent meaning on such unmistakable terms? Molnar does it with considerable cleverness by making the offending lover a keen horticulturist discussing, not feminine anatomy, but peaches. In the English performance the peach is retained, but not the passage that it explains away. The whole thing therefore becomes pointless. It is a key without a lock: an answer, but no riddle. The curious state of the regulations governing the English theatre is further illustrated by the fact that though in general theatrical performances are not permitted on Good Friday, *The Play's the Thing* was licensed for presentation in Brighton on that day this year as an educational entertainment.

16, WEDNESDAY. *Present Laughter*, at the Haymarket Theatre. The censor's department appears to work on the principle that what the ear doesn't hear, the eye won't notice; so, though *The Play's the Thing* suffered, the second act of Mr. Noel

Coward's inconsequent comedy about the trials and temperament of a leading actor is allowed to remain intact. Not often is love-making combined with discussion of the Albert Hall; and this scene's complete divorce of dialogue from action is a very pretty marriage of the intelligent and the daring. Mr. Robert Eddison's unsnubbable dramatist from Uckfield is wildly funny; Mr. Coward's pettish, unsentimental charm coolly amusing; and Miss Joyce Carey is both a managing and an attractive wife.

26, SATURDAY. *Bless the Bride*, at the Adelphi Theatre. *Bless the Bride*, the new musical comedy that Sir Alan Herbert, in the intervals of his Parliamentary duties as the senior representative of the University of Oxford in the councils of the nation, has written for Mr. C. B. Cochran, is the first show of its kind we have seen since 1939 that comes up to the standards of pre-war delicacy and elegance.

Possibly an exception should be made in favour of the two musical entertainments with which Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge enlivened wartime London, and the recent production at His Majesty's of *Romany Love* was gaily dressed and beautifully appointed. But the merit of this last piece was something that reflected no credit on Britain; for its elegance was due entirely to costumes brought over from the United States.

Mr. Cochran's *Bless the Bride*, now at the Adelphi, cannot be described as wholly British, either; for if it has in it three people who score great personal successes, one of them is French. This is Georges Guétary, and of the successes obtained in a show that is full of them, M. Guétary's is outstanding. Mr. Cochran has always had a flair for finding Continental stars and bringing them to London. In the realm of theatrical talent, he has ever been a vital figure in the import trade. Singers, dancers, acrobats, and beautiful young ladies—he has brought scores of them over from the Continent in his 126 London shows.

M. Guétary is as good as any of them. We have Mr. Cochran's word for it, in the first speech he has made on a first night for more than twenty years, that off the stage M.

Guétary comports himself with the modesty to be expected in an agreeable young man.

On it he is modest, too; but he has a personality that marks him out as a star. Short and not particularly handsome—though quite easy on the eye—he has a resounding and flexible tenor voice such as is rarely heard in the frivolous melodies of musical comedies. His rousing rendering of a characteristically French song, “Ma Belle Marguerite,” is a highly pleasant experience, and deserves all the immense applause it obtained.

The two other hits of the show are Miss Lizbeth Webb and Mr. Brian Reece. Miss Webb, a year ago, was a chorus girl; to-day she is a leading lady of unobtrusive charm. She is not in the flamboyant line of stars; no dominating of the stage for Miss Webb, and when there are others on it, it would be an exaggeration to say she is the cynosure of all eyes. But to such eyes as gaze on her, she is undeniably attractive. The modest violet, the retiring, shy primrose, are the things she reminds one of. Very nice, too.

Mr. Reece as the Honourable Thomas Trout is admirable. He is in the great tradition of folly. Tall, aristocratic, and quite astoundingly silly, he pretends to wickedness with a childlike innocence. He proclaims a Machiavellian policy of deception with the fresh blandness of the morning dew.

Mr. Reece has also the single serious and touching moment in the play. The French soldier whom the heroine loves is supposed to have been killed in battle. Mr. Reece sings a song lamenting that somehow he has missed his big moment. He longs to do something bold and gallant. He wishes to hear people say, “Bravo, Thomas! Well done, Trout!”

Then he gets engaged to Miss Webb, whom he has been vainly pursuing all the evening. Soon afterwards the soldier reappears. Trout hands Miss Webb over to him with a quiet and charming diffidence that shows Mr. Reece to have pathos as well as humour.

Mr. Vivian Ellis’s music is pleasant and catchy, and Sir Alan Herbert’s book serviceable, though not shatteringly witty. It is all about an English young lady who becomes engaged against her parents’ will to a French actor, and in its later stages it is mixed up with the Franco-Prussian War. None of

this matters. The piece is well dressed, sung, staged, danced, and acted, and is agreeably much ado about nothing.

This is Brian Reece's first appearance in London. He is twenty-six years old and he delighted my daughter Margaret, who is to-day fifteen years younger than he is, as much as he delighted me.

30, WEDNESDAY. *Oklahoma!* at Drury Lane. *Oklahoma!*, which has just opened at Britain's most famous theatre, Drury Lane, has shaken London up more than anything that has hit it since the first flying bomb.

People began to queue outside Drury Lane thirty-six hours before the curtain rose on the first performance.

And they clapped, cheered, whistled, and shouted for twenty minutes after the curtain came down.

Fourteen times the curtain rose and fell at the end of the show—and still the bediamonded, boiled-shirted audience went on applauding as if it wanted the whole show over again.

And it very nearly got it! The men twirled their cowboy hats, the ladies lifted up their skirts, and sang all over again "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top," "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning," and the other songs that have made *Oklahoma!* famous throughout America.

Thinking over *Oklahoma!* I harked back to a previous show.

The Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, I remembered, got off to a poor start after the war with Noel Coward's *Pacific, 1860*, a tired and conventional romance that failed to make any impression on the affections of the British public. It had an American leading lady, Mary Martin, but even the most insular of Britons would not suggest that the play's failure—it ran for only three months—was due to transatlantic influence. Indeed, subsequent events would lead one to suppose that what *Pacific, 1860*, needed was not less American colouring, but more; not merely an American leading lady, but an American hero as well, an American comedian, and American chorus girls.

This, at any rate, is the theory on which the Drury Lane authorities have acted; and the result is *Oklahoma!* Harold Keel, the tuneful and handsome hero; Betty Jane Watson, the plumply attractive heroine; and every other member of the



cast are American. The scenery painted in those bright, hard colours—those brilliantly contrasting reds and greens and blues—which, in this softer greyer climate tend to shade imperceptibly into one another, also comes from America.

And both scenery and players will long be exiles from their native land. For *Oklahoma!* is one of the most immense successes Drury Lane has ever known. It is a bigger success than *Rose Marie*, bigger even than *The Desert Song*, which until a few days ago held the record in advance bookings for this theatre.

So great a success, in fact, is *Oklahoma!* that Drury Lane is rendered a little apprehensive of it. A library deal for the first three months of its run amounts to £52,000. Though I can print this figure in America, it is not allowed to be issued yet in the British Press, lest the public be encouraged to stop trying to get into the theatre on the ground that it is already overbooked.

Is this success deserved? There can be no doubt of it. The music is the freshest and most melodious we have heard in a musical comedy since *Show Boat*. What is more, although *Oklahoma!* has been running in New York for a couple of years, it came to the first-night audience at Drury Lane entirely new and unfamiliar. How this secrecy was achieved no one seems to know.

It is, however, the dancing that makes the greatest impression on London theatre-goers. It has about it a superb precision, getting an absolute bull's-eye every time, that is something we do not see in British musicals. I won't say that the British style of musical lacks its own peculiar charms. There is a grace about it, at its best, and a restfulness, which are very agreeable. It has the leisureliness of cricket, whilst *Oklahoma!* has the speed and energy of baseball.

But, apart from an occasional show like Charles Cochran's *Bless the Bride*, and the too rare productions of Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge, British musical comedies during the last few years have not been good examples of their kind. In contrast, it is almost impossible to imagine anything better in its own particular way than *Oklahoma!*

Not the least pleasing thing about this show is that every

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member of the company makes an individual contribution to its success. The singers, including William Sutherland, Robert Patterson, and Earl Young; the dancers, George Stecher, William Clarke, and half a dozen others; the enchanting little girl with yellow pigtails (Margaret Auld Nelson); the shrill comedienne, Dorothea MacFarland, chorus and principals alike, all do their jobs with the same skill and exactness, making the show one entire and perfect chrysolite.

## MAY 1947

1, THURSDAY. *The Red Mill*, at the Palace Theatre. Coming from the speed, freshness, and life of *Oklahoma!* last night to this shabby, half-hearted revival of an old-fashioned Victor Herbert operetta is like stepping from a gleaming Rolls-Royce into a fusty, musty, horse-drawn cab that has been mildewing in the stables for years. The piece is said to have cost £15,000 to produce, yet the scenery (Dutch windmills and old inns) doesn't look new, nor the dresses, either.

19, TUESDAY. *Oak Leaves and Lavender*, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. Was Shakespeare wrong, who made his common people talk in prose? Have grace and loveliness and gallantry gone out of life with the passing of satin and brocades?

These are the questions that Sean O'Casey asks in his latest play. There are ghosts in his great house in the West Country; they move in the stately patterns of a minuet: they rustle in silken gowns and knee-breeches: and they lament that a time is coming when the wide halls and the lofty drawing-rooms will be inhabited by land girls and farmers, by air-force cadets and grooms and Local Defence Volunteers, and fine manners and poetry and beauty will have disappeared.

So staunch a democrat as Mr. O'Casey will not admit that these fears are justified. Silk may become corduroy, and fine accents the lilt of Irish peasants; but honour remains honour and courage courage, however they are dressed. *Oak Leaves and Lavender* is, in other words, the reply of one Irishman to another; it is an assertion that the age of chivalry cannot die.

I wish I could say that it is an effective assertion. The

scene, as I have said, is a country house in Cornwall: the time, the Battle of Britain. There are all the paraphernalia of war: steel hats, and the rumble of exploding bombs, and the zoom of aircraft, the invading voice of the German radio, and the breathless rushing hither and thither of young men and women in uniform, trying briefly to snatch a little pleasure before the night falls and the shadows come.

There is much fine speaking, as one would expect in any play by Mr. O'Casey; the old butler's bitter preparation for battle after his son and the young master of the house have been killed, in particular, is astringent and moving; and there is a scene at the end of the second act, as an air raid begins and for a moment courage starts to sag and waver, which grandly recalls many an episode of terrors triumphed over; but on the whole the play does not succeed in its intention of showing that fustian and tweeds may be as brave as fine linen.

Why not? Partly, I think, because too much of Mr. O'Casey's eloquence is just eloquence and nothing more; it is big words used bigly without regard to character or circumstance; and though it tickles the ears, it does not always, nor even often, move the heart.

There is, however, in the play a grandeur of spirit, a generosity of temper, which, in spite of dramatic defects, would, I think, come through in any performance more adequate than that given at the Lyric. In a quiet way, this performance must be one of the worst ever seen in London.

There is nothing spectacularly wrong about it, yet there is hardly anything quite right from beginning to end. The son of the house, for example, is indistinguishable in speech and bearing from his friend and companion, the butler's son. And even the virtues of the performance—or what, in another play would be virtues—help to spoil it.

Consider Mary Hinton, for example, an actress who invariably gives me very great pleasure. Miss Hinton is the lady of the house. This is right and proper. Miss Hinton can play a great lady very well. She has poise and breeding. She is also the embodiment of coolness and common sense. She is the personification of sanity. In her presence, vagaries and mad-nesses vanish away. Though all the world lost its senses Miss

Hinton would keep hers. Her outlook upon life is whole as the marble, founded as the rock. Wherever she goes she carries with her the clear light of untroubled day.

It is a wonderful gift. But it is not the gift that this play needs. Dame Hatherleigh is filled with odd fantasies and strange vagaries. She is brushed by the wings of folly. None of this, unhappily, comes through in the Lyric performance. The half-lights and the shadows go, and with them the play's poetry.

20, TUESDAY. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, at the Piccadilly Theatre. The cast of this play has been notably strengthened by the inclusion of Mr. Hugh Burden as Angel Clare, but Miss Wendy Hiller's Tess still remains, as it was last year in Bristol, its shining jewel. With rosy cheeks that any intelligent apple would envy, Miss Hiller is physically well suited to Hardy's opulently earthy heroine: temperamentally too: she causes Tess's love for Angel to seem a blessing and a benediction, and confounds morality by making murder only a very little thing. This murder, however, is the play's chief trouble. Mr. Ronald Gow's serviceable adaptation succeeds in nearly everything except making it credible.

21, WEDNESDAY. *Dark Emanuel*, at the New Lindsey Theatre. In Mr. Gordon Hoile's play a group of Fascist conspirators atomize London. In consequence, even 360 years later there are no traffic jams, no loudspeakers, no telephones. Despite this, existence then is hardly pleasanter than it is now, life being disagreeably "nasty, brutish, and short."

Its only compensation appears to be the presence of Miss Isabel Dean, as a second-sighted young lady who knows all the answers. This actress subdues her natural radiance to a performance of drawn, admired tension; and makes a small, neat sensation of the revelation of the gap in time which is the second act's chief secret. Mr. Antony Eustrel begins promisingly as the leading conspirator, but later on falls too much to a-moaning and a-groaning; and Mr. Daniel Wherry (with no materials at all) draws an intriguing portrait of a dictator who resembles a big, bland, brutal baby.

## THEATRE

28, WEDNESDAY. *Boys in Brown*, at the Arts Theatre. Comparing *Boys in Brown* to a piece with which it has obvious resemblances, I will say that its sneaks, thieves, bullies, workshysters, and weaklings, unlike the poets and sentimentalists of *Now Barabbas* . . . , give the impression of being the real thing. Adding only that, to one who has always preferred Richard II's company to Iago's, the dream is sometimes more agreeable than the reality. Nevertheless, the reality both moves and amuses, especially when the very clever author, Mr. Reginald Beckwith, is content rather to adorn a tale than to point a moral. It is a first-class play wherever it is not a first-class sermon.

Mr. André Morell as the Governor draws with firm strokes and subtle the portrait of a good man in authority: Mr. Nigel Stock brings a restrained passion to the part of the sound fellow whose companions will not allow him to develop his soundness; and, as the half-witted Welsh lad, Mr. Hugh Munro shows that the step from the ridiculous to the sublime is but a short one. He is the only character in the play who hears the horns of elf-land faintly blowing.

29, THURSDAY. *The Bird-seller*, at the Palace Theatre. Tyrolean yodellers, slapping their ankles in athletic dances; an emperor and an empress spying upon each other while disguised as simple peasants in a forest glade; a fairy-tale ballet given in a lavishly gilded palace: these things roused an immense audience to immense enthusiasm. For myself I liked the poise of Miss Adèle Dixon, the bravura of Mr. James Etherington, the exuberance of Miss Irene Ambrus, and the easy Imperial dignity of Mr. Barry Mackay, who, not for the first time, acted very well in the sort of piece in which good acting is not much regarded. I do not, however, quite see the point of Mr. Tauber's silencing himself with a conductor's baton. Wilde without wit, sausages without mash, strawberries without cream, salt without savour, Shinwell without indiscretions are to me but pale and ineffectual images of Mr. Tauber without a voice. In these circumstances, it seemed equally appropriate, or equally irrational, that, at the first performance, the best comedian in the theatre (by which I mean Mr. George Robey) should be sitting

as mute as Mr. Tauber, gazing, I thought a little sadly, from a box.

30, FRIDAY. *Edward, My Son*, at His Majesty's Theatre. The audience at His Majesty's to-night had one of the most pleasing experiences in the world—that of seeing a round peg driven, with superb assurance and complete success, into a hole as circular as Giotto himself could draw.

This vast and ornate theatre demands a big play and a lavish production. Between them the managers, Mr. Sherek and Mr. Miller, and the director, Mr. Peter Ashmore, provide the second upon a scale that would have caused Tree and Oscar Asche to rub their far from gaunt sides with satisfaction; and the authors, Mr. Robert Morley and Mr. Noel Langley, offer the first.

His Majesty's Theatre also demands big acting; and big acting is precisely what Mr. Morley gives it. Mr. Morley is no delicate miniaturist; he has no truck with the half-tone and the subtle gradation. His stock-in-trade is the ten-league canvas and brushes of comets' hair. Anyone who goes to see Mr. Morley act in this play should leave his telescope at home. Even if he sits in the back row of the gallery, he won't need it. I suspect that Mr. Morley does not much affect Jane Austen, but I guess he dotes on Victor Hugo.

Which reminds me. Hugo wrote a long novel to show that a good man may be ruined for life by stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. The authors of *Edward, My Son* have written a long play to prove that a clever man may steal his loaf of bread to give his infant son an essential and expensive operation; and in the process be ruined, not for life, but eternity.

But playgoers who desire the theatre to give them entertainment rather than instruction need not be alarmed. Mr. Langley and Mr. Morley may now and again indicate that the soul of their hero is lost; but they are more vividly concerned with the fact that his body is clothed in fine linen, and that he fares sumptuously every day. The everlasting bonfire may be waiting round the corner; but what allures them is the primrose path.

And very gaily do they tread it. No man could burn down a shop for the sake of the insurance with more aplomb than Arnold Holt; or bully a headmaster with a manner more suavely overbearing; or take a mistress with more exuberance than Sir Arnold; or dominate the financial world with more energy and less scrupulousness than Lord Holt; or worship his worthless son with more undisciplined affection, with more devoted and selfish folly, than this same Holt, whether Cabinet Minister, knight, or just plain scoundrel.

In all his phases, he is abundantly worth watching. *Edward, My Son* is a very accomplished piece of playwriting. Its unity of theme holds it together in spite of its episodic nature. It is witty; its curtain- and exit-lines are pungent and slick. It is admirably played: by Miss Peggy Ashcroft as the wife whose enchantment, through neglect, declines into dipsomania; by Mr. D. A. Clarke-Smith as the perplexed headmaster (steel outside, putty within); by Mr. Richard Caldicote as the confederate whose nerve fails when the stakes are raised too high; by Mr. John Robinson as the mild but stubborn doctor; and by Mr. Morley himself. On the other hand, it is sentimental; it romanticizes; its political allusions are surprisingly maladroit; and it is intensely theatrical. But where should one be theatrical if not in a theatre?



## JUNE 1947

3, TUESDAY. *Off the Record*, at the Apollo Theatre. This is another of those agreeable comedies in which Ian Hay and Stephen King-Hall, in a naval atmosphere, show younger members of the upper classes having larks. It is light, slight, and bright. Mr. Hugh Wakefield is delightfully an admiral who, negotiating deep waters, has been out of his depth all his life; and Mr. Hubert Gregg, in as unemphatic a performance as I have ever seen, gives an impression of emphatic charm. Last week I praised Mr. Robert Morley for banging the big drum: to-day, for astutely managing the soft pedal, I commend Mr. Gregg.

4, WEDNESDAY. *Ever Since Paradise*, at the New Theatre. During the performance of Mr. Priestley's play to-night I remembered three things. I remembered the first time I invited my wife (who then was not my wife) to go to a theatre. I remembered the first time I called her (she still was not my wife) by her Christian name. And I remembered a violinist at the Sheffield Empire who, in 1929, played "The Last Rose of Summer." The first two recollections were complimentary to Mr. Priestley, but in my judgment the third was not. For the violinist who played "The Last Rose of Summer" was, at the same time, turning a somersault.

Is all this complicated and confusing? Maybe; but not more complicated and confusing than Mr. Priestley's play. Yet, before plunging into further mazes of unintelligibility, I will interpose here a moment of clarity. I think *Ever Since Paradise* is a bad and boring play. I think it verbose and pretentious. I think to-night's audience, which cheered itself black in the

face, and for whose opinion I don't care a Shinwell's hoot, was wrong. I think that my critical colleagues, who amaze me by saying that the play is good, and whom I view with affection and respect, are wrong. It is, of course, possible (I exclude no hypothesis, however remote) that *I* am wrong. Anybody is at liberty to recall Johnny, whose mother, when she saw him marching with the regiment, remarked how odd it was that everybody else was out of step. But don't forget Galileo either, who said the earth moved, when all the world said it didn't.

Now back to incoherence and the violinist.

The question about that violinist is, Was he any good? He was certainly original: Kreisler does not play his instrument with his head lower than his waistcoat buttons. He was certainly clever: to turn a somersault, even without making a noise at the same time, is no mean feat. But was he any good as a musician? The answer is No. And the reason? Precisely that he turned a somersault. *If he hadn't, no one would have listened to him playing either "The Last Rose of Summer" or anything else.*

Now, *Ever Since Paradise* is original; and it is clever, too. When the curtain rises, there is a grand piano at either end of the stage. Mr. Dennis Arundell and Miss Jane Carr play these pianos very agreeably. Presently they quarrel, and into this quarrel break Miss Ursula Jeans, magnificently gowned, and Mr. Roger Livesey, in evening dress. These charming people (as talented as personable) proceed to discuss marriage, its joys and, principally, its pitfalls.

By way of illustration, on a small stage inset into the back of the real stage, the whole story of the relationship between two young people, Rosemary and Paul, is told from first acquaintance to divorce. Miss Jeans and Mr. Livesey comment on each episode of this story: they pop into and out of it, giving a hand here and there with the supernumerary characters, changing their costumes, their voices, and their convictions as the occasion demands. They argue with each other, they philosophize, they cut short the episodes or enlarge them as they please, they talk in the strains of Whitman, they try to calm the too ebullient artistic temperaments of Miss Carr and Mr. Arundell, they even turn out to be at the end divorced them-

selves. This is the play's great surprise. I consider Mr. Priestley to be one of the world's three greatest living dramatists. I have praised him before, and I shall praise him again. But to keep *Ever Since Paradise* going, he needs all the surprises he can muster.

There is a moment in *Ever Since Paradise* when Paul asks Rosemary to accompany him to a theatre (standing in the lighted hall as he bids her good-bye, fumbling at his hat and mackintosh, he says, haltingly, "I suppose that a girl like you goes out every night with fellows who've got a lot more money than I have, but to me Thursday will be quite an occasion"). There is another when he first ventures on her Christian name. Both these moments, beautifully handled by Miss Joy Shelton and Mr. Hugh Kelly, are true and touching. Such moments, however, are few.

What is the point of the ingenious devices of discussion, musical interruption, and double stages? The simple truth is that they are Mr. Priestley's somersault. The story of Rosemary and Paul is his "Last Rose of Summer." I submit that this story (or what Mr. Priestley has seen in it) is not in itself sufficient to engage an audience's interest. So he obscures and overloads it with a display of dazzling and irrelevant skill.

Dazzling, did I say? It depends on whether the quality of dazzlement, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder.

Mr. Priestley certainly arouses strong feeling. For such views as I have expressed above, I was either extravagantly praised or extravagantly blamed. One correspondent thought them a "beautiful exposure" of a bad play, another (much impressed by the fact that the piece had roused Bournemouth to enthusiasm) considered my "attack" unworthy of a critic. The play has apparently hit Bournemouth between wind and water. It contains so many truths for married couples that my correspondent found it "almost embarrassing." He wrote his postcard in such a state of emotion, by the way, that he forgot to sign his name.

5, THURSDAY. *Life with Father*, at the Savoy. This was the last time I saw Jimmie, at the little party he gave for Dilys and

Leonard. I had to leave early, in order to see *Life with Father*, America's longest run, which I mildly enjoyed. Amiable irascibility is a sure card to play in the theatre. Throughout this comedy, which, rather curiously, is chiefly concerned with the theological problem of adult baptism, Mr. Leslie Banks is hardly ever in a good temper: which means that the audience is never in a bad one. Whether *Life with Father* will run as long in England as in America, where it has proved more durable than either wars or governments, I won't prophesy; but it is simple, rollicking fun.

6, FRIDAY. *Angel*, at the Strand Theatre. Miss Joyce Redman, in this play about a girl who may or may not have committed murder, who may or may not be insane, looks at times like a thing enskied and sainted; at times like a baby with an unfair allowance of original sin; and at times like Alice in Wonderland. A fine, not to say horrible, performance.

7, SATURDAY. *Annie Get Your Gun*, at the Coliseum. In grace, charm, high comedy and low, in serious drama and in Shakespeare, I modestly believe London makes New York look provincial. But in the sharpshooting, fast-stepping Broadway musical comedy, can our gently nurtured, our well-bred English players encompass the zip, zest, precision, speed, athleticism, and attack without which the bowstring is slack, the tyre flat, and the pants suspenderless? Patriotism thunders Yes; but at *Annie Get Your Gun* honesty whispers No.

This new show has frequent merits. Too many of the lyrics perhaps give the impression of not having got over the first fine careless rapture of their introduction to the facts of life. But the music is racy, plentiful, and easily singable: the costumes are gay and colourful: the dances well devised and original: and the story of a Buffalo Bill circus show in old Ohio is pleasantly unexpected.

The especial virtue of the piece, however, is Miss Dolores Gray as the sharpshooting heroine, a cactus plant that wishes to be a hothouse flower, a pinch of pepper that desires to approximate to the condition of sugar. Miss Gray has come all the way from America to prove that a girl can be as pretty as a

picture and yet have the kick of prussic acid: and I have met nothing so convincing since I gave up reading Euclid.

At the end of the first performance of *Oklahoma!* there were fourteen curtain calls, and the audience would not disperse until the company had sung the choruses again of all the principal songs in the show. *Annie Get Your Gun* finished amid scenes of equal enthusiasm. This was Dolores Gray's twenty-third birthday, and the applause lasted for twenty-seven minutes. A record was made of it, and sent over to America. The story of *Annie* is better than that of *Oklahoma!* and its star is an experience both delightful and shattering. *Oklahoma!*'s strength lies in its chorus, every one of whom is a soloist, and in its dances, which are the best in London. The chorus work of *Annie* is much slacker, and the scenery has not the glittering, gleaming newness of *Oklahoma!*'s.

10, TUESDAY. *Miranda*, at the Embassy.

11, WEDNESDAY. *Calcutta in the Morning*, at the Players' Theatre. This is Repetition, Encore, or Do It Again Week in the theatre. After seeing Sir Basil's mermaid doubled by Mr. Blackmore, I am not surprised to find Mr. Geoffrey Thomas writing a play about the world as it will be when civilization is destroyed by an atomic bomb. That is, Mr. Thomas goes to the Far East to find the same theme I saw man-handled in *Dark Emanuel* a few weeks ago at a theatre in Further Kensington.

With characteristic ingenuity the tiny Players' Theatre spiritedly tackles the problem of staging a millionaire's office, an olive-groved island, and the Mediterranean Sea; and the play begins promisingly with Mr. John Longden as a disillusioned business man expressing cosmic discontent with the economics of the export trade in a voice beautifully controlled, exquisitely modulated, and practically inaudible. But when the aeroplane that is carrying him, his family, and his secretary crashes into the sea more is sunk than the machine.

13, FRIDAY. I went to *A Fish in the Family*, at the Boltons Theatre. By one of those coincidences more common in Hardy than in life, Sir Basil Bartlett and Mr. Peter Blackmore have

both hit on the notion of writing plays about mermaids. Naturally, the resulting entertainments have a certain amount in common.

*A Fish in the Family* (Sir Basil) and *Miranda* (Mr. Blackmore) equally accept Dickens's proposition that "according to the constitution of mermaids, so much of a mermaid as is not a woman must be a fish." They agree that mermaids are melodious creatures, whose music has an enchanting effect on the sea and especially on sailors: their maidens utter such dulcet and harmonious breath that the rude sea grows civil at their song: and even tars shoot madly from their spheres.

Not Tweedledum and Tweedledee could be more alike than our authors in thinking that mermaids are attractive creatures: both Miss Barbara Shaw (the exhibit at the Boltons aquarium) and Miss Genine Graham (the attraction at the Embassy peep-show) are facially qualified to launch as many ships as you wish to mention; and they enhance their natural attractions by every art learned in a thousand years at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. Miss Shaw sits in an invalid chair "singing alone, combing her hair" in the finest Tennysonian manner; and Miss Graham, in pictorially the best scene in either play, ravishly lies out on a balcony in a house overlooking the Thames, in a storm of thunder and lightning, swishing her tail in fishlike ecstasy. Finally, each author discovers the action of his play by bringing his mermaid to dry land.

There, however, the resemblance ends. There is nothing either good or bad (not even mermaids), but thinking makes it so; and the thoughts of Sir Basil and Mr. Blackmore could hardly more widely differ. For Mr. Blackmore elbows himself into the spirit of farce; but Sir Basil is palely romantic.

In *Miranda* Mr. Blackmore's eminent surgeon, Sir Paul Marten (Mr. Ronald Ward) returns from a Cornish holiday with a patient (much swathed about with travelling-rugs in the lower regions) who has never been able to walk. She has to be carried from chair to settee, from sofa to limousine: and, for the dazzling privilege, males of every type (upper middle-classes, artist, chauffeur), social distinctions forgotten, compete on the basis of let the best man win, while their wives (even

the lovely Miss Nora Swinburne) have to stand around, feel annoyed, and look as though they didn't care. Many jokes can be made about fish: and Mr. Blackmore, with precision and aplomb, makes them all. His play is consequently highly entertaining, and I have only one objection to it. His mermaid is not a mermaid, but merely a pretty girl with a deformity of the feet.

Mermaids are creatures of mythology; and mythology, I take it, involves magic. But Mr. Blackmore is writing a comedy, it may be said. Very well, then: let the magic be comic. But on magic I insist. Otherwise how does a mermaid differ from any other creature save for a trifling physical peculiarity unworthy of the consideration of a philosopher? There must, somewhere in a play about mermaids, be a suggestion that the lady has sometimes listened to old Triton's horn, or, rounding an oceanic corner, occasionally rubbed shoulders with Leviathan.

Sir Basil, at any rate, knows this. He has set his scene on the most western coast of Scotland, where, out of the mist and rain, the enchanted islands call to all the men of the great and ancient house of Blair. On these islands sit the mermaids, beckoning and enticing; and in the great house, equally unrelenting, sits a stern, black-gowned and very old lady (Miss Marie Ney) putting up that resistance to the mermaids which her menfolk can't. On an unwelcome visit to Blair comes one of these marine ladies, Laura. It is Laura's habit to visit Blair once every generation: men pass from athletic youth to decrepit age; even the castle grows older, but not Laura. As with the element in which she lives, Time writes no wrinkle on her azure brow, and wherever she goes, infatuation follows.

Or that is what Sir Basil intends. There is a delightful performance by Mr. Ernest Thesiger (all mannerism subdued) of a timid and tentative chaplain, and, as I have said, Miss Shaw is a very pretty mermaid. But the magic does not happen.

Though I walks with fifty  
'ousemaids outer Chelsea to the Strand,  
An' they talks a lot o' lovin', but  
wot do they understand?

grumbled Kipling's soldier. Sir Basil doesn't deliver the goods, either. But he is in the correct market. His mermaid would lure men to their destruction, while Mr. Blackmore's amusing flirt is only game for a kiss and cuddle on the sofa. Shall I say that Mr. Blackmore just hits the wrong target, and Sir Basil misses the right one?

17, TUESDAY. *He Who Gets Slapped*, at the Duchess Theatre. When the curtain rose on Mr. Tyrone Guthrie's production of Mr. Robert Helpmann's *Hamlet* some years ago, it disclosed a large stage set in the interior of a palace with courtiers moving to and fro between huge and soaring pillars. Eagerly one's eye searched the scene for some point of central significance, and an appreciable time elapsed before it came to rest upon a black and tiny figure curled up gracefully at one of these pillars' feet.

This was Mr. Helpmann: this was Hamlet: a Hamlet who, in spite of a smoothness of movement that beguiled the heart, and a grave nobility of voice, was dwarfed and diminished by the gloomy splendour of Mr. Guthrie's stage decorations, and the skill with which Mr. Guthrie manages the turbulent rush and eddy of a crowd.

Once again Mr. Guthrie and Mr. Helpmann are together: but this time victory tips the other way. Not that Mr. Guthrie gives in easily. Leonid Andreyev's *He Who Gets Slapped*, set in a circus tent, gives his pictorial imagination the stimulus it needs: and a fine confusion of brooding shadows on bulging canvas, of flaring lights and blaring bands, is the result. The stage is never still: clowns and conjurers, in yellow tinselled garments, lion-tamers and jockeys, dart continually across it. Among these clowns is a deaf mute to whom Mr. Alfie Bass gives a dreadful, half-witted gaiety; and once, off-stage, a dog is beaten to teach it new tricks. Its yelps and whimpers echo faintly round the theatre: and these unhuman sounds, and those other sounds that the mute tries to, and cannot, make, are the most moving things in the performance.

Mr. Guthrie, it will be seen, is in good form; but so is Mr. Helpmann. If Mr. Guthrie's scenery in *Hamlet* dominated him, here he dominates Mr. Guthrie's scenery. When he



enters in the first act, a slim, neatly bearded figure, a Vandyke Charles I in clinging black coat and white delicate gloves, he subdues the noise and flurry of the circus tent to its proper background role. Pale, grave, and thoughtful, he is a Hamlet who this time has Mr. Guthrie under control; indeed, for a few moments it seems that he is in control of the play.

That pleasing illusion, however, is soon dispelled. For, as the evening wears on, it becomes clear that in *He Who Gets Slapped*, Andreyev is less concerned to be a playwright than a philosopher. What begins as drama develops into a dialogue of dreams: and Mr. Helpmann, rightly seizing the bit between his teeth, finds that it dissolves into the shadow of a shade.

The clown who wishes to play Hamlet is a familiar literary figure; but what of the Hamlet who wishes to play the clown? Andreyev works at the deep Freudian levels. His Prince, his graceful, philosophic, dignified aristocrat, is a man who, at thirty-nine, wishes to daub his face with flour, to have it struck in the sight of jeering multitudes, again and again, by clowns and mountebanks. He yearns to be a laughing-stock; he hungers after humiliation. He wants to turn his back on responsibility, on art, on culture. These things are too heavy a burden for him to bear. Kings have abdicated: but here is something sadder, more tragic still, an abdication of the spirit.

At least, so I suppose: though Andreyev does not seem to make up his mind whether this is indeed an abdication or a release, whether the Prince is a coward or a philosopher. The play wanders directionless, and the Prince, who started by being a real, if mysterious, figure, ends only as a vague abstraction of the world's resignation from responsibility. Who can grow excited at a metaphysical phantom, or hold his breath over the fate of a similitude?

Mr. Helpmann, so long as his part has any shape, makes it very shapely indeed: whilst Mr. Ernest Milton has caught the rhythm and the music of the foolish Count Mancini, and no doubt the words will come later.

18, WEDNESDAY. *Pygmalion*, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammer-smith. A fine play finely revived. Mr. Alec Clunes attacks Higgins with the zest of a man eating a hearty breakfast after

a ten-mile walk; and Miss Brenda Bruce's Eliza is bacon and eggs, too, rather than caviar.

19, THURSDAY. *A Sleeping Clergyman*, at the Criterion Theatre. A play that has some of the best acting in London. Take Mr. Robert Donat, for example. To make genius convincing on the stage, and goodness interesting, are amongst the most difficult things either actor or dramatist can attempt. Mr. James Bridie, a modest and reasonable man, in his three-generational, big-fisted, homicidal, plague-ridden attack on eugenics, calls on Mr. Donat to concern himself only with the genius; and this Mr. Donat, passing from tragic consumptive cough to comic stammer, does consummately, suggesting that it is for him the easiest thing in the world to unite the medical passion of Lister with the argumentative fluency of Mr. Shaw.

It was, by the way, extraordinarily bad luck on Mr. Donat that, at the opening performance, his rackingly effective cough in the first scene was quite outclassed in the second by some bassoon-like bellows off-stage which, as far as I could gather, were supposed to be made by a small boy clearing his throat.

Then Miss Margaret Leighton, as a betrayed young woman, a murderess, and an international pacifist, whose intensity of conviction, beside the thundering force of Mr. Donat, seems pale only because it has passed from red heat to white, gives three impressive performances. In especial, her young murderess has a subdued, breathless excitement that is strangely disturbing; it twines itself round the heart, and almost strangles it. Never, whilst I've been about, has Miss Leighton played as well as this before. Finally, Mr. Francis Lister, neatly fielding all the goodness that Mr. Donat spurns, has to demonstrate that even ninety-three years of virtue are not a bore; and what is more, does it.

20, FRIDAY. *Noose*, at the Saville Theatre. A lively presentation of London, '47, in terms of Chicago, '26, that develops into a head-on crash between Borstal boys and the lesser public schools. Most of the characters talk like *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. The others were last heard of in *Stalky and Co*. Mr. Charles Goldner, immense (as only a little man can be)

as a depressed gangster. Mr. Nigel Patrick diverting as a Cockney doing well for himself. Mr. Michael Hordern plays the gallant hero with his tongue anywhere but in his cheek.

24, TUESDAY. Saw *Oklahoma!* again.

25, WEDNESDAY. Saw *Bless the Bride* again.

What is all this nonsense about traditional English musical comedy having been killed by the triumph of *Oklahoma!*? It seems to be based on the fact that we have recently had two palatial musical comedy failures. But these pieces failed of their own defects, not because they lacked the virtues of *Oklahoma!* It is absurd to build theories on the deaths of things that never showed any signs of being alive.

*Oklahoma!* succeeds, not because it has a new musical comedy formula, but because of the freshness, the intelligence, and the skill with which that formula is used. Let any manager embody what he imagines to be the new American streamlined formula in an English *Oklahoma!*—Mr. Eric Maschwitz says that this notion is being earnestly discussed in Shaftesbury Avenue—let him stage this English *Oklahoma!* as wearily and as shabbily as some of our recent failures, and he will produce a flop whose echoes will be heard at the other end of the spiral nebulae.

On the other hand, let him produce an English musical comedy on any formula whatever with the freshness, intelligence and skill of *Oklahoma!* and, like *Oklahoma!*, it will play every night to capacity. It isn't the formula that matters, it's the way the formula is used. Is proof of this wanted? Then let anyone try to get in at the last moment at Mr. Cochran's *Bless the Bride*. I went to *Oklahoma!* again yesterday. Drury Lane was crowded. The audience was packed like sardines in a tin. To-night I went to *Bless the Bride*. The Adelphi was crowded. The audience was packed like pilchards in a can. This is just, and right, and proper. And it is what any intelligent man would expect. Because the aeroplane has been invented, is the racehorse outmoded? Because we have had the Schneider Trophy, will the Derby never be run any more?

In dealing with *Oklahoma!* it seems to me that we have been too modest. We assume too readily that every virtue it

possesses is distinctively American. Whereas, as soon as the first curtain rises on the front of Laurey's farmhouse, as soon as it reveals the simple, broad, unbroken, contrasting colours of the red sheds, the green and yellow fields, and the wide blue sky, surely the name that jumps to the playgoer's lips is not American, but British. This sort of effect is precisely what Lovat Fraser used to achieve at Hammersmith twenty and more years ago. And it is, of course, none the worse for that.

We have also, I think, been barking up the wrong tree. We have concentrated on the fact that *Oklahoma!* is new, and missed the more important fact that it is true. True, I mean, in the artistic sense. The creators of *Oklahoma!* have had a real and genuine feeling about the old Indian Territory. They have seen its broad acres as the embodiment of a rough and robust innocence. Its inhabitants fight and squabble during the week. They hold hands under the moon at night. And on Sundays, to the sound of church bells, they emerge from their farms in their spruce and homely best. In everything they do there is a sense of youth, and a sense, too, of simplicity. From the first moment of the show to the last this feeling is never lost. *Oklahoma!* spurns sophistication; it jeers at the knowing and the arch. Its perfect symbol is the yellow pigtailed dancing girl of Miss Margaret Auld Nelson, who never opens her mouth, and yet has all the poignant eloquence of the last hours of childhood. It is because it is based on a real and not a faked emotion, and because that emotion is translated with skill and with sincerity, that *Oklahoma!* succeeds.

Base any musical comedy, base any play, on a genuine feeling, convey that feeling with skill, and I venture to say that it will succeed also, whatever may be the technique employed. Curiously enough, there is about *Bless the Bride*, too, this same simplicity. But whereas the naivety of *Oklahoma!* is that of the countryside which knows nothing of the ways of towns, the innocence of *Bless the Bride* is that of Mr. Toots, who thought himself no end of a fellow.

Here, again, we can find its perfect symbol in one of the characters, in the Honourable Thomas Trout. Trout, tall, languid, moustached, longs to be an artist in tergiversation; he would revel in terminological inexactitudes. Unfortunately,

he has not the brains for successful lying; all his whoppers turn out boomerangs. Mr. Brian Reece, who has not been seen in London before, but who, I hope, will be seen many times again in the years to come, plays him with an irresistible mixture of charm and simplicity. To see Trout raising his straw boater to one pretty girl after another at a tea-party on the vicarage lawn makes one's heart go out to him; he is so eager to be noticed, he is so ready to withdraw if snubbed. The sudden, startled jerk of the head that Mr. Reece gives when one of his blunders comes home to roost, the complete emptying of his face of every emotion except alarm, are entirely endearing. And he has a very pretty touch of pathos. The comic tenderness of his proposal to the bereaved Lucy (who is exquisitely played by Miss Lizbeth Webb) could not be bettered.

The moral of all this is very simple. Produce an entertainment that is good of its kind, produce it well, and you will reap your reward. Produce a lack-lustre version of another kind of entertainment that you suppose to be popular; and you will also reap your reward. But whether it will be worth having is another matter.

26, THURSDAY. *Mary of Magdala*, at the Boltons Theatre. Mr. Ernest Milton, in his new play about Mary Magdalene, tells well a story that has already been told superlatively. Sir James Barrie had the same experience when he made a play out of the life of King David. But in performance he had the Bergner to help him. Mr. Milton has not.

## JULY 1947

1, TUESDAY. *Spanish Incident*, at the Embassy Theatre. The Embassy—but in quite a nice way—continues its studies of the lady friends of eminent Nazis: a Group of Ignoble Dames more in the manner of Le Queux than of Hardy. In *Birthmark* the chief character was Hitler's mistress; in *Spanish Incident* she is Goering's; and I wait with ill-controlled impatience for the light that the Embassy in the near future will doubtless throw on the emotional entanglements of Goebbels.

Meanwhile, I note that this hue and cry after the Nazis in Spain is as good as anything since Henty; that Mr. Wyndham Goldie is a Secret Service leader of authority and acuteness; that Mr. George Curzon has been for years among our best actors of the silk-and-suavity school: and is so still.

2, WEDNESDAY. *Maya*, at the Arts Theatre Club. Many people confuse acting with impersonation. If a man with the thews, sinews, and assemblance of a lamp-post can, by the aid of a couple of cushions, give a passable impression of Falstaff, they are apt (if I may quote a deep thinker, Mr. Sid Field) to exclaim in admiration, "What a performance!" In this sense of the word, there is only one scene in *Maya* in which Miss Vivienne Bennett acts at all. It is the middle scene in the second act, and, apart from the last (in which she does not appear), it is the worst in the play.

*Maya* is the kind of drama that Maupassant might have written if he hadn't been a genius. Its heroine, Bella, is an inmate of a brothel in a waterfront street in Marseilles. She is an ignorant little slut. I don't count it against her that she can't pronounce Trondhjem: that might happen even to those

of us who have got the School Certificate. But her notions of the world are so vague that she doesn't know whether Norway is to the north or the south of France, and she thinks the Red Sea is somewhere in America.

So far, so good. But *Maya* is a product of the nineteen-twenties, that hard-boiled age which fancied it could never be gammoned, and therefore saw in the vicious all the virtues its predecessors had found in vicars. Bella is not only a prostitute, but also a preacher; not merely a slut, but a solace. "What a chimera, then, is man! . . . What a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! . . . Depository of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error, the glory and the shame of the universe." And that goes for women, too. Especially it goes for Bella.

Now, for the first part of Bella's character, Miss Bennett has to act in the sense in which I have used the word in my first sentence. She has to discard her natural breeding, and to assume a coarseness that is foreign to her. To a certain extent, half-way through the second act, she does something of this sort. When her noisy, contemptuously good-humoured lover brings to her his quiet middle-class friend, Bella's attempts to impress the unaccustomed visitor, to refine her accent (which is already golden), have a touch of vulgarity about them. Miss Bennett does not convince us of her heroine's station until she tries to rise above it. I suppose that, if impersonation is acting, this was Miss Bennett's best scene. In those circumstances, I think she is better when she is not so good.

Surely art is the expression of a personality: the personality moreover, of the artist. We don't expect Dickens to write like Gissing: we expect him to write like Dickens. We do not complain that he is always the same: we complain only (and rightly) when he is someone different, as in *Hard Times*. The actor's position is, it is true, not quite the same as the novelist's. For in a play, there is another artist at work, the author, to whom the actor has certain obligations. A few weeks ago, in a piece called *The Animal Kingdom*, Miss Renée Asherson played the part of a girl whom the author had seen as a young, sophisticated, amoral artist. Miss Asherson played it with the poignancy of a trampled daffodil. I found her performance very moving whenever I could forget that it was out of character.

Here was an extreme example of conflict between the personality of the player and the nature of the part. I don't think this conflict would in any notable degree have been resolved had Miss Asherson attempted an impersonation against her natural bent. She was wrong, not in not giving what she hadn't got, but in offering what she had got when it wasn't wanted.

The actor, then, should get parts that suit his personality. Otherwise he will be fighting his author all the evening, or else trying to bring out of himself what really isn't there. Of course, what is there may be dull and wearying. In that case, it doesn't mean that he is acting wrongly. It means that he oughtn't to be acting at all.

It is on these principles that Miss Bennett works through the greater part of *Maya*. I have long wanted to praise her. There are certainly actresses in London with bigger names than Miss Bennett; there may be actresses who are prettier (but not much and not many, I add hastily); there is none who can better express the mood of a sad tranquillity, the peace of a bruised spirit. With this, as with a garment, she envelops all the distressed men who come to Bella's room on the waterfront; and if it is only the half of Bella, it is certainly the better half.

That admirable actor, Frith Banbury, violently disagreed with the argument set out here. "No, no, no, no, *no!*" he protested. "Please don't encourage us in these dreary ways of ours. Art should be more than the expression of a personality—certainly acting should be more than that. Was Edith Evans's *Rosalind* nothing but an expression of a personality? Olivier's *Richard III*, Puff, *Oedipus*—these performances so different one from another that by your ruling they could not possibly have been by the same actor?"

I see no difficulty here. The personality of the great actor is necessarily rich: it has many facets. It may, therefore, be expressed in many different ways. Because Britannia and her trident don't look like the king's head, must it be asserted that they cannot all appear on the same penny?

8, TUESDAY. *Deep are the Roots*, at Wyndham's Theatre. If Arnaud d'Usseau and James Gow, the clever authors of this



clever play, recognized that bad opinions may be held by good men, then *Deep are the Roots* would be a tragedy instead of a melodrama. They believe, however, with their Yankee hero, that the upholders of white supremacy in the Southern States, with the cruelty that this involves, must necessarily be scoundrels; and their Southern aristocrat, neat in semi-tropical linen, quoting Shakespeare with a melancholy grace, is only a Simon Legree, even if a Legree who has been to Princeton. He does not flog his negroes to death, but is content with the equally effective method of falsely accusing them of stealing his watch. This perhaps is hardly a fair presentation of the white case: the whites' frame-up of the returned negro soldier at moments seems rather like, on the authors' part, a frame-up of the whites themselves. But, frame-up or not, it is done with spirit and intelligence.

9, WEDNESDAY. *The Voice of the Turtle*, at the Piccadilly Theatre. If ever a play were expected to be certain of success, it is this. It has been running in New York since 1943, and in that city Miss Margaret Sullivan achieved in it a great triumph. Miss Sullivan has come over to play her original part in London, but I gather that last night nothing went right at the dress rehearsal, and Mr. Gilbert Miller, who is presenting it, and sat just behind me, seemed to be in considerable agitation before the curtain went up at the first public performance.

Before the evening was out, I thought Mr. Miller's agitation justified.

The stage setting of Mr. John Van Druten's play shows an expensive apartment in New York (bedroom, living-room and kitchen), seen in cross-section, like the side of a loaf that has been sliced down the middle. For the first five minutes after the curtain went up I watched with pleasure and admiration the skill of Miss Margaret Sullivan in passing repeatedly from kitchen to living-room, and back again, without once allowing the swing door between them to thump her on the heels. With this grace did Woolley bat: with that assurance did Cinquevalli juggle.

There came a moment, however, when Miss Sullivan ceased her peregrinations, and began to talk. As Sally Middleton, an

actress out of a job, she conversed with her friend, Olive Lashbrook, also an actress and also out of a job. These two young ladies, who comprise two-thirds of the entire cast, discussed, not art, not work, but men; and it soon became evident to me that the last place where I had encountered such morals as they professed was a rabbit-warren; and that the last place where I had encountered such intellects as they possessed was, by a curious coincidence, a rabbit-warren, too.

This, I admit, depressed me; and when the final thirty-three and a third per cent of the company arrived on the stage in the person of Mr. Wendell Corey as Sergeant Bill Page, my depression continued, for, though he quoted Shakespeare and had heard of Chekhov, he did not much increase the play's intellectual pressure. For the wicked there is always hope; from Augustine to Loyola and beyond, sinners have been turned into saints. But for the feeble-minded, not. History holds no record of a congenital idiot developing into a Senior Wrangler. Later on, Bill Page, discussing the art of the theatre, says that he doesn't like plays about men paralysed from the waist down. I wish Mr. Van Druten equally disliked plays about men (and women) paralysed from the neck up.

As the evening progressed, and Bill Page ceased to be Miss Lashbrook's property, and became Miss Middleton's, and Miss Middleton developed a conscience about having been other men's property before, I asked myself what could have been the secret of the immense success that *The Voice of the Turtle* has enjoyed in America. It could hardly be the shining appointments of the labour-saving kitchen, which, housewife's thrill though they be over here, are, I understand, common form in the United States; nor yet the playing of the "London-derry Air," for gramophone records are not unobtainable across the Atlantic; nor the fact that when he wrote it Mr. Van Druten was British: for, justly popular as the British must ever be among all right-thinking peoples beyond the ocean, plays have failed in New York that have been written by men as British in blood and even more British in name than Mr. Van Druten.

America is fond of moral paradoxes. Nobly she asserts that all men have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: yet establishes conditions such as are revealed in *Deep*

*are the Roots*. She likes to be tough, and, at the same time, tender. A play like *The Voice of the Turtle* hits such tastes fairly between wind and water. It is sophisticated; yet it is sentimental. Sally Middleton is well advanced down the road to promiscuity; but she talks with dimming eyes about her old mother in Joplin, Missouri. She can refuse nothing to the first able-bodied soldier that comes along; yet in voice and brain has the innocence of a child. She dallies in the primrose way; and then Mr. Van Druten calmly pretends that she has been in the strait and narrow all the time.

The play, in fact, superficially has the shocking glitter of *Esquire*; but prick it and you find you have drawn blood from Sir James Barrie. Barrie and *Esquire* are both admirable in their way. But their ways are different. The play's fusion, or confusion, of them is its greatest artistic defect, yet it may prove again its financial salvation. For the world is full of people who like to eat their cake and have it.

A gentleman from Middlesex wrote to me about this: "Your article shows an incredible lake [*sic*] of knowledge of the modern theatre. . . . This play is delightfully written and beautifully acted. I venture to say that it will be a box-office success, whether you like it or not. . . . Although I have never met you, I can well imagine you to be a mid-Victorian fuddy-duddy."

Consolation, however, came from Oxford, where Exeter College maintained, "You were magnificent on *The Voice of the Turtle*," and then inquired soberingly, "Are you as good on *Hamlet*?"

*The Voice of the Turtle* ran for only sixty-one performances. London is full of mid-Victorian fuddy-duddies.

11, FRIDAY. *The Crime of Margaret Foley*, at the Comedy Theatre. This play has Miss Kathleen O'Regan as a distressed, unfaithful wife, Mr. Noel Morris as a drunken husband, Mr. Terence de Marney as a murderer, and Mr. Arthur Sinclair as Mr. Arthur Sinclair. There have been times in the past when the titanic vituperative energy of Mr. Sinclair has proved too much for me; it takes one leviathan to appreciate another, and I am only a very little fish. But here Mr. Sinclair

is calmer than of yore; he subdues his natural exuberance to the force of a mere typhoon, and is better than I have ever known him. When, thinly disguised as a butler, he wheels in the brandy on a tea-tray, his contemptuous air is a superb reproof of all social climbing. The play itself is a little in the Crummles manner, but Mr. Morris's last telephone call to his wife is worth hearing. Mr. Morris is to be praised for showing that a man may be elderly, fat, stupid, and drunk, and yet, for sincerity's sake, be in love without being ridiculous.

14, MONDAY. This intelligent letter arrives:

DEAR MR. HOBSON,

To-day I read your criticism of the play *The Crime of Margaret Foley* at the Comedy.

May I, as a student of acting at the Old Vic Theatre School, ask you a few questions about this?

I saw the play locally and said it would never come to the West End. Did you not think Mr. Terence de Marney over-acted? Wasn't the plot extremely weak?

This play is called "quite ingenious" by one critic, and you certainly gave it a good write-up compared with the one given for *Richard II*.

I am comparing these two plays, not because I am a student at the Old Vic, but because I cannot understand why one play, intelligently and well acted, should draw sarcasm from the critics, and the other, a third-rate melodrama, should be quite well received. Please could you explain this?

Yours sincerely,

ROSEMARY CLARKE

First, for a few facts. I didn't give the play a good write-up compared with *Richard II* (which wasn't my work anyway). What I did give a good write-up to was the performance of Mr. Sinclair and Mr. Morris. I indicated that the play was a melodrama, and rather an absurd melodrama at that. Nevertheless, the tone of my notice was favourable, but this was entirely because of the two actors I have named. Nevertheless, Miss Clarke's point is a good one. Trifling little pieces often receive more lenient judgment than masterpieces and near-masterpieces. But the explanation is simple. No man hunts butterflies with the apparatus he takes out for tigers. Besides,

the company that is given *Richard II* to act is presented with much more than the company that has to do what it can with *The Crime of Margaret Foley*: and to whom much is given, from him much is expected.

15, TUESDAY. *The Nightingale*, at the Prince's Theatre. Rousing tunes, pretty costumes, spirited dancing, and lots of Chinamen and Japanese six feet high. Amid the red silks, the green satins, the lacquer and the palanquins I disentangled Mr. Gavin Gordon, Mr. Kenneth Kove and Miss Fabia Drake. Mr. Jack Hulbert's production gives the slow-moving East a hearty shove in the back.

16, WEDNESDAY. *Trespass*, at the Globe Theatre. Mr. Emlyn Williams, in his new play, attempts to emulate the spiritual influence of the Orchid House at the Horticultural Show. The man who went in an atheist, it will be remembered, came out believing in the Devil. If, during the performance of *Trespass*, you can preserve the rich confidence of your scepticism, you will still admire the play, as you would admire the cunning complication of the springs of a watch, but you are unlikely to be moved.

But if, on the other hand, your unbelief is shaken, and you really think that the little fluent Welsh draper so intent on getting a plate-glass window for his shop is truly possessed, your feelings may still be those of a man looking at a watch: the feelings, shall we say, of a man looking at a watch, and finding that the time is within five minutes of his execution?

It is, of course, this latter impression that Mr. Williams is anxious to produce; and he would have produced it, I think, upon a bigger proportion of his audience if he had been less clever. Mr. Williams still has the brain that brought him a first-class degree at Oxford: it is apparent in his ingenious reflections upon the consequences of three and two adding up to six: it is apparent, also, in the extremely complicated plot that he unfolds in his ancient, Gothic-arched, and many-stair-cased castle, where an inquiring scientist, a half-crazed widow and a frightened girl try to evoke the dead.

In other words, Mr. Williams stimulates the brain into

activity. He himself, in the person of an Italian medium, has hardly been upon the stage for five minutes, gibbering inarticulately like a dumb man vainly attempting to speak, before the question is busy in every playgoer's mind: Is it conceivable that for an entire evening Mr. Williams will keep his fine Welsh voice silent, or confine it to a few mutterings in a foreign tongue? Of course it isn't. Pavlovas don't go on the stage to practise their knitting. The simple process of rationation, therefore, shows that this Italian medium isn't Italian. He may not even be a medium; but here Mr. Williams springs a surprise, and a fine surprise, too.

My immediate point, however, is that Mr. Williams, both by his mistakes and by his subtleties, keeps the brain busy. But the brain is no more at home in raising the devil than in making a declaration of love. Something more elemental is needed, something that stuns the intellect, and stills the mind, and leaves only the emotions stretching out, quivering and afraid and irresistibly curious, into an unknown world of fascinating terror.

That stretching out is, in Mr. Williams's opinion, forbidden. He subscribes to the flippant wisdom of G. K. Chesterton, that, in dealing with spirits, *you* begin with table-turning, and *they* end with turning the tables. His Countess Christine says she is an explorer, pushing back the limits of the known world. She is like Mme Curie: did not, she demands, Mme Curie discover radium? But is not the answer to this that not all explorers discover radium? Look what happened to Columbus.

Seriously, however, Mr. Williams advances the thesis that some kinds of knowledge are evil; and I am inclined to think that he may be right. But oddly enough, he is so possessed of this conviction that it makes him at the end curiously insensitive to what is happening to his own characters. A theory is proved, and, in the proving, a man is killed. That death seems a fact of surprisingly little importance. Curtains are drawn, and people make relieved remarks about the day returning, and a new life beginning, all as if one Welshman more or less in the world didn't matter.

Mr. Williams's medium is finely projected: not an accent is wrong, not a flutter of the hands could be improved. Mme

Françoise Rosay, as the mad Countess, looks very distinguished, and does well things at which actresses not half as good would not have failed. Mr. Leon Quartermaine admirably represents the inquiring dignity of science. And Miss Marjorie Rhodes, as the fake medium, with a bicycle bell above the knee, is first-rate fun.

17, THURSDAY. *Men Without Shadows* and *The Respectable Prostitute*, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. Whatever may be the legitimate limits of realism on the stage, the first of M. Sartre's plays transgresses them. Presenting murder, rape, torture, and sadism, it achieves as much aesthetic effect as a street accident.

*The Respectable Prostitute* makes amusing fun of American racial prejudice, though one cannot help feeling that there must be better occupations than jeering at the weaknesses of friendly nations. Both plays are very ably acted. Mr. Philip Leaver cleverly creates a French tool of the Gestapo of revolting loathsomeness, and Mr. Denis Carey hits the very heart of sadism. Everything is right about Mr. Peter Brook's production except its pace, which is that of a middle-aged snail dosed with a sleeping-draught.

18, FRIDAY. *This Blessed Plot*, at the Boltons Theatre. A dull comedy about dull people discussing, with occasional humour, but more often dully, their emigration to America. With resource and charm Miss Isabel Dean almost succeeds in disguising the fact that her part of a young married hostess has neither height nor breadth, nor any other substance.

22, TUESDAY. *Peace in Our Time*, at the Lyric Theatre. Mr. Noel Coward's new play is a very spirited affair. Nobody is likely to be bored by it. There is a large cast of bartenders, lorry-drivers, smartly tweeded and energetic old ladies up from the country, S.S. men, loving mothers, Gauleiters, patriotic and brave young women, female novelists, and editors of Left-Wing weeklies. All these characters are sharply etched, and they are played by a bunch of good actors and actresses who last the pace of a gruelling evening, and come past the post in, as might be expected, a bunch.

## THEATRE

There is a deal of smart wit, incidents follow plausibly and excitingly on each other's heels, Mr. Coward's stagecraft is efficient and at times striking; and the play as a whole is quite unequal to the demands of its theme.

First, let me show how cunning Mr. Coward's technique is. The action opens in the saloon bar of a public house near Sloane Square. (Mrs. G. E. Calthrop has made this a larger, airier, altogether lighter and brighter place than saloon bars appear to be to me whose knowledge of them is confined to hasty glimpses of dark and stuffy interiors caught from the insides of L.P.T.B. buses. But experts assure me that my investigations, having been pursued in other parts of London, and anyhow lacking thoroughness, do not hold for the more august region of Belgravia. So let this pass.)

There is a quantity of somewhat edgy talk from the loungers, and a Left-Wing editor

casual observations as not a leading man

even. Nerves are obviously strained, but

the dialogue to show that this is not an ordinary

certain ordinarily at war. Then someone turns

back news, and as Big Ben is striking, the poet

ly observes, "It's funny to think that that can be heard all over the world."

The force of that word "still" is tremendous. Why shouldn't Big Ben be audible all over the world? The thought that leaps to everyone's mind. Already we are prepared for the revelation the news conveys when it goes on to say that Hitler's army will drive in procession down the Mall. England

Without that thought to accept the premises

of the establishment, writing a

play that assumes the British Empire, or Napoleon's Army. But

with a single word, spoken by Miss

Beatrice Varley, Mr. Coward undermines our incredulity, shakes the foundations of our instinctive assumptions, and wins our belief in his play.

I am glad to be able to praise Mr. Coward for his unobtrusive



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notle feat of craftsmanship, for I am afraid I shall  
or little else, except perhaps for the negative,  
the virtue of not writing like M. Sartre  
and tortured girl is thrown rough  
the floor of the bar, do the thur  
*Shadows obtrude*

run  
(Coliseum 'T)

Olaf Pooley, Berni  
varley, Captain Michael, Maureen Pryor.  
(Lynn)



Hazel Terry introduces a touch of glamour; and Mr. Alan Badel, if he does not bring to fruition the astonishing promise of his prize-winning appearance at a R.A.D.A. matinée some years ago, at least does not belie it.

23, WEDNESDAY. *Headlights on A5*, at the Embassy Theatre. There are more violence and hysteria in five minutes of this play than in all *Peace in Our Time*. I know no more of lorry-drivers' pull-ins than I do of public houses; and the murders, screams, face-slappings, double-crossings, and black-marketeering of this Embassy specimen do not encourage me to pursue my investigations even to the point of peering in from a bus. Mr. Elwyn Brook-Jones, as a passionate and powerful sub-human, is tremendous.

Three days after this, we went on a month's holiday to Oban, returning through Grasmere. Summer, in Alexander Smith's phrase, leapt on Scotland like a tiger, and everywhere we went, on land or sea, up Ben Nevis or across to Iona, we were baked and bronzed. Whilst we were away, the most important plays produced were James Bridie's *Dr. Angelus*, a study in religious mania and murder, and J. B. Priestley's *The Linden Tree*, a story of a professor in a provincial university whose colleagues wished him, on account of age, to retire, but who was determined to go on working while life was left in him. Both these plays, but especially *The Linden Tree*, won golden opinions from all sorts of people. We returned through the Lake District.

## AUGUST 1947

20, WEDNESDAY. *The Girl Who Couldn't Quite*, at the St. Martin's Theatre. Shakespeare was contemptuous about titles. He could afford to be. But writers of at present less eminent fame, like Mr. Leo Marks, who has thought up *The Girl Who Couldn't Quite*, would be well advised to walk with care over territory on which Shakespeare skated in perfect safety with one eye shut.

On Monday evening, as the last rays of the setting sun shone on the peaks of the wall of great hills that surround Grasmere, I sat on the lawn of the hotel there, and when it became too dark for me any longer to follow the brother-worshipping lines of Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal*, some phrases of J. K. Stephen came unbidden into my mind:

Two voices are there. One is of the deep . . .  
And one is of an old half-witted sheep:  
And, Wordsworth, both are thine!

It occurred to me then that the London theatre, too, is double-voiced. Ten days ago I gather that it was speaking in accents of courage, sadness, and nobility in Mr. J. B. Priestley's *The Linden Tree*, but when I remembered that in fifty hours' time I should be seeing an entertainment called *The Girl Who Couldn't Quite*, even the peace of the darkening hills, even the unrippled waters of the mountain lake, could not prevent my heart from sinking. For if ever a play seemed predestined to half-witted imbecility, to farcical bedroom futility, it surely would be called by some title such as this.

I am glad to say I was wrong. *The Girl Who Couldn't Quite* is by no means half-witted. It is very far from imbecile. I

would not indeed be understood to suggest that it is a good play. Even the effects of a three weeks' holiday of blazing sunshine working on a nature generous and kind-hearted to the point of moral weakness cannot blind me to the fact that *The Girl Who Couldn't Quite* has several surprising errors of taste, and in the matter of construction is what Mr. Winston Churchill once happily described as a "boneless wonder."

It is confused and confusing. It jumps at curtain-rise into the middle of its subject with so breathless a leap as to bark the skin off its knees, it mentions key-words so casually that intelligent and attentive playgoers may be excused if they do not know what its most exciting scene is about, and the author too frequently gives the impression that he is waiting for something to turn up. Now and again, however, something does turn up; it is generally inappropriate, often impressive, and always unexpected.

There are several scenes in the play that are quite touching, there is one that is very moving, and another that is gripping and frightening. The central character is a young girl who has been so terrified in childhood that nothing can make her laugh; the doctors can do nothing for her, the psychiatrists are baffled, and even the best-regarded comedians of our time cannot bring to her lips the faintest ghost of a smile. Then, through the windows of the great house in which she lives, she sees a man, handsome, tall, splendid, and she breaks out into the first laughter she has ever known. Naturally, there is a hue and cry after this magnificent stranger, who is eventually brought into the drawing-room, captured and struggling, and turns out to be, as most of the audience has already guessed, not splendid, or tall, or handsome, but a scarecrow tramp, jabbering, in the patient and gentle voice of Mr. Clifford Mollison, the most extreme illiterate Cockney.

It is this Cockney who cures the girl. In a scene of considerable power he elicits from her the terrible story of her nurse, and it is typical both of the play's strength and its weakness that this story has some of the creeping terror that Hugh Walpole used at times to evoke, and yet hardly makes clear that it is about a nurse at all. But, to those who are fortunate enough to get the hang of the thing, this scene is a

worthy companion-piece to *The Killer and the Slain*, and even to *The Turn of the Screw*. It is, moreover, like nothing else in the play, which, when it is not puzzling by its technical maladroitness, has a sentimental charm recalling (faintly?—perhaps) Barrie and Milne. This charm is seen most beautifully in the ending, where the girl, cured, in one respect sees less clearly than when she was ill; Mr. Mollison—at last perceived (and wrongly perceived) as a thing of rags and tatters merely—most softly and grievously takes his dismissal: a scene sad and enchanting.

Wherever Mr. Mollison has to express kindness and gentleness he is excellent. At other times, with a musical comedy actor's over-emphatic exuberance, he shoots wide of the target on all sides. In working his way over from one side to the other, however, he gets an occasional bull's-eye. Miss Patricia Plunkett, in the trying role of the unlaughing child, is effectively but also uncomfortably tense; and that admirable and grave actress, Miss Louise Hampton, deals with some of the curious jokes put into her mouth by apparently taking great care not to let anyone hear them.

Finally, then, the piece is full of mistakes, and its inept title puts one in the wrong mood to appreciate its merits. But the merits are there. And Mr. Marks may well reflect that eventually it is by his merits, and not by his defects, that an author is remembered. Or where would Wordsworth be?

In making his curtain speech after the first performance of this first play by Leo Marks, Clifford Mollison had one of those sudden inspirations that on the spur of the moment seem unbearably and all too speakably brilliant, but which actually are a gin and a mantrap. In the middle of his speech a voice from the dress circle called out in clear and deliberate accents: "Good acting in a rotten play."

It was then that inspiration unhappily lighted on Mollison's head. With a cheerful smile and extreme readiness, he exclaimed: "Obviously the author!" So far, so good. In fact, very good. But he immediately added, "Something like this happened at a first night of a play by Bernard Shaw. Mr. Shaw said, 'Sir, that is exactly my opinion, but what are two among so many?' I echo Mr. Shaw's remark." Mr. Mollison

forgot that a joke which may come very well from the author may not be at all the same thing when spoken by the principal actor.

*Telegraph* (W. A. Darlington) thought the play clumsy, but that it had a certain quality in it.

*Observer*. Finishes down the course. (J. C. Trewin.)

*News Chronicle* (Alan Dent) talks of Clifford Mollison's subtly beautiful performance.

21, THURSDAY. *Separate Rooms*, by Joseph Carole, Alan Dinehart, Alex Gottlieb, and Edmund Joseph, at the Strand Theatre. A bright example of the wise-cracking American comedy-farce of insult and innuendo, in which Miss Frances Day, blonder than platinum, smiles more persistently than anything out of Cheshire. This is appropriate, since, if the men in the play are cads, the women are cats. Mr. Bonar Colleano who, as a butler, lightly demonstrates that Americans have no class-consciousness, would be exceedingly amusing if one could hear what he says. A very good example of (in my opinion) a very bad kind of entertainment.

Judging by the wild applause with which the large and handsome audience greeted the fall of the curtain, I should say that I had the majority with me in respect of at least half this statement.

*Observer*. Lively, vulgar, tepid, and blessedly brief. (Ivor Brown.)

*Telegraph*. Just another tough farce. (W. A. Darlington.)

*News Chronicle*. Frances Day returns to our heart's affections. (Alan Dent.)

26, TUESDAY. *The Chiltern Hundreds*, at the Vaudeville Theatre. Mr. W. Douglas Home's sparkling new comedy is about a Labour viscount who is defeated at a by-election in 1945 by a Conservative butler. When Mr. Home's first play, *Now Barabbas* . . . was produced earlier this year, no one shouted for it more loudly, or for longer, than I did myself; and his latest piece is widely, wisely, and warmly praised by my judicious colleagues. One is therefore, I think, justified in

going beyond the immediate matter in hand, and in inquiring whether in Mr. Home the theatre has found a dramatist who will in future win fame for himself, and do the stage some service.

The setting of *Now Barabbas* . . . was a model prison: that of *The Chiltern Hundreds* is a feudal castle. Thieves, perverts and saboteurs formed the subject-matter of Mr. Home's first play; aristocrats and their friends and retainers are the characters in his second. It would appear from this that Mr. Home has that prime requisite of a dramatist who intends to stay the course; a wide range. And it may well be that he has.

But let us here be careful of an error in logic. Some years ago a lady, dressed in a bathing-costume, entered the sea at Dover. She emerged at Calais. It was therefore assumed that she had swum the Channel. But the lady was a humorist, and had crossed the Channel by the simple process of being picked up in a boat. Now the fact that Mr. Home understands both peers and pickpockets does not necessarily mean that he knows the vast range of the population that comes in between. He knows the letter A of the alphabet. He knows the letter Z. But there are twenty-four others with which as yet he has shown no acquaintance.

Before we acclaim the width, if not the depth, of his understanding of human nature we must be satisfied that he can sympathize with the aspirations of insurance agents, enter into the souls of housewives, and comprehend the vague longings and the searing problems that afflict bus-drivers, bell-hops, bureaucrats, barristers, bank clerks and beetle collectors.

Secondly, it would appear that Mr. Home hasn't the knack of dealing convincingly with the theme which, down the ages, has proved to the drama and to the novel the most vitally inspiring of all. In *Now Barabbas* . . . there was little opportunity, and no need, to present at length the relationship between the sexes. But the light comedy of *The Chiltern Hundreds* demands at least a suggestion of romance. Mr. Home does in fact provide two romances, though with only one hero. For the electioneering viscount falls in love with an American heiress and his mother's housemaid, and proposes to both. Mr. Home's treatment of each of these episodes

might, in future textbooks of the drama, be quoted as school-room examples of Mr. Bernard Shaw's theory that of all human passions love is the most boring.

Whether Mr. Home is aware of his deficiency in this respect is open to doubt. If he were, it is unlikely that he would saddle himself with a hero who swops young women twice in midstream. Few things in literature are more difficult than to present a faithful heart that doesn't know its own mind for two minutes together. Trollope did it in the character of Lord Silverbridge in *The Duke's Children*; but Trollope then was an experienced master of his craft. Shakespeare did it in *Romeo and Juliet*; but he had the wit to keep his Rosaline off-stage. Mr. Home keeps his Rosaline constantly on view; and at times it isn't easy to be sure she isn't Juliet. In other words, Mr. Home tries an unnecessarily difficult form of a problem for which he has no great aptitude. He is the immature mathematician who bemuses himself with the differential calculus without having mastered the rule of three.

I have been severe with Mr. Home. But only because I think he is worth being severe with. I wouldn't punch a butterfly on the nose. *The Chiltern Hundreds*, with such reservations as I have suggested, is a brilliant comedy.

The central notion of the piece is richly comic. It is at once unexpected and plausible. And it is developed with a plentiful quantity of excellent wit. The household at Lister Castle, at the 1945 election, is listening over the radio to the long tale of Conservative defeats. "Poor Mrs. Churchill," sighs the countess. It is almost what many people in the audience said themselves, almost, but not quite. And in that slight, that unforeseen, variation, what a world of humour there is, what a world, too, of kindly understanding of human nature.

But the triumph of the play—and in a small way it is a triumph—lies in the character of the Viscount's father, the Earl of Lister, and in the Viscount's father's butler, Beccham. The Earl is played by Mr. A. E. Matthews. Mr. Matthews has been upon the stage for sixty years; he was already an experienced actor when Wilde's first comedy was produced; he was well known when Sir Henry Irving was at the height of his fame; he is a contemporary of Sir Herbert Tree, and the mere



list of parts he has played fills four columns of Mr. John Parker's *Who's Who in the Theatre*; yet I cannot believe that he has ever given a better performance than in *The Chiltern Hundreds*. He wears old clothes and carries an old name with equal ease, and, whether entertaining his butler to lunch as a newly elected M.P., or surprising his son in a compromising situation with the housemaid, entertainingly proves that there is no problem which cannot be solved by fine manners combined with a judicious absent-mindedness.

Equally delightful, and painting with bold flourishes and happy emphasis where Mr. Matthews dabs here and there with a hesitant but exact tentativeness, is Mr. Michael Shepley as the superbly political butler, a man who feels almost as deeply for the Constitution as he does for his own rotund phrases. Miss Marjorie Fielding is a witty countess, but Mr. Shepley and Mr. Matthews are giants of high comedy.

## SEPTEMBER 1947

2, TUESDAY. *Child's Play*, at the Arts Theatre. This play is full of echoes. Mr. Reginald Beckwith, having decided that *Ghosts* needs writing all over again, has thrown in reminiscences of not only *The School for Scandal* and *What Maisie Knew*, but also of *The Silver Cord* and half a dozen other pieces in which mother-love is indistinguishable from the hug of an octopus.

The result is confused, sometimes stimulating, often witty, and vaguely second-hand. Mary Bannister, like Mrs. Alving, should have left her drunken, unfaithful husband. Like Mrs. Alving, she stays, and her son, John Bannister, like Oswald, grows up with a maggot in his brain. But he also has a tongue in his head, and this tongue runs away with the play, its pattern, and its moral.

The grown-up John Bannister, himself married, and the father of a young son, will use Sheridan's screen to topple over his wife's reputation; but he does it with so gay and engaging an air that what should be the consummation of spiritual perversion seems very like a Christmas joke. John is in fact an inconsequential wit of the order of Chesterton's Duke in *Magic*, a delightful creation who makes nonsense of the play's theme. Ably assisted by Mr. Gordon Bell as an airman who is entirely dumb in the American sense of the word, and nearly so in the British, he turns a grim and tortured tragedy into a light comedy.

The acting and production are as even as the Himalayas. Mr. Hugh Burden's John is witty to the world and tender to his son; this actor plays beautifully the character Mr. Beckwith has created, and not the one the theme demands. Mr. Stanley Van Beers's elder Bannister, the first of the erring

husbands, is also unexpected in a play of this type. If Miss Ruth Lodge's much-trying possessive mother recalls *The Silver Cord*, her black-moustached, twistedly smiling husband comes right out of *The Silver King*. At any moment, I expected Mr. Van Beers to put on a cloak and dark hat, and blow up the theatre with a store of hidden dynamite. When he faded out of the play without having poisoned the morning milk, or pushed anybody off a bridge on a rainy night, I felt cheated.

3, WEDNESDAY. *Point Valaine*, at the Embassy Theatre. Is this play of Mr. Noel Coward's as serious as the talented company at the Embassy, giving it its first London presentation, make out?

Linda Valaine, the middle-aged but still attractive owner of a beach hotel in the West Indies, has for seven years been the mistress of her head waiter, Stefan, a huge, hairy creature given to making noises more intelligible, one would think, in the jungle than in the refined air of Swiss Cottage. Then comes a young English airman, tall, fair, clean-limbed, trailing clouds of *Boy's Own Paper* glory, and he and the hotel keeper fall deeply, sincerely, in love.

In an atmosphere of threshing rain and imminent thunderstorms, their romance is broken by the irruption of the head waiter into the lady's bedroom, where, most inappropriately, he plays the accordion in the middle of the night. Justifiably annoyed at this social gaffe, Linda tells Stefan that she has never really loved him. The next morning he drowns himself, and Linda, hearing the news, withdraws to her room with these words, "I must engage another head waiter." That is the last line in the play.

A good deal depends on how it is spoken. Miss Mary Ellis delivers it stonily, in a voice flat with dismay, from which all life, all passion have been crushed. But though Linda's own world may have ended, the other, the outer world must go on. The daily round, the common task thrust their importunate demands into her sorrow. Meals must continue to be served, and guests accommodated at *en pension* terms. Certainly she must engage another head waiter.

This is very impressive, but it cannot have escaped the

ingenious producer, Mr. Peter Glenville, that the line is susceptible of a rather different interpretation. May there not be more in Mrs. Valaine's haste to find a substitute for Stefan than Miss Ellis's well-bred performance suggests? The daily round is well enough in its way. But what of the nightly relaxation?

I cannot, in fact, believe that there is not throughout this play more of the cynical, irreverent, unsentimental Mr. Coward than Miss Ellis, Mr. Glenville, and their clever troupe of supporting performers allow us to perceive. Miss Lynn Fontanne appeared in America as Linda in 1934. I can see nothing in the part as skilfully and consistently interpreted by Miss Ellis to allure that brilliant and flashing actress who went from Woodford, Essex, to show New York what high comedy is. If I am wrong (such things have been known), so much the worse for the play. For, supposing *Point Valaine* really to be no wittier than it seemed to-night, then it is more drearily verbose than Mr. Coward has any right to be.

*Point Valaine* is a very long play, and after it Peter Glenville, the producer, made a very long speech. He regretted that Coward is in the United States, but said that Mrs. Coward, the author's mother, was in the theatre. At this point there was a mysterious bump in the dress circle, and scores of leaflets began to flutter down into the stalls. Glenville, still a long way from his conclusion, continued to plough his way oratorically onwards. When he had finished I picked up one of the leaflets, a neatly printed double sheet of paper.

On the front page I read: "*Point Valaine* or Harlequin 'Tit-for-Tat.' An Ugly, Brutal Play of Tremendous Fascination. Ready shortly. By Townley Searle. Author of *Peace in Our Time*, etc., London: The Collectors' Club, 26 West Street, W.C.2 (Tem. 6147)."

It is a pleasing piece of typography—good, bold, black type, not too ornamented. The inside pages were blank, but the fourth page had an announcement of "*Peace in Our Time*. By Townley Searle." Underneath the title of the play were these forceful words: "When the rush to see the fireworks is over, and Mr. Coward is dead and forgotten, this is the play of which men will speak and which—translated into every language—will be played in the Theatres of the World."

A thousand of these leaflets were scattered by Mr. Searle. When I got outside the theatre, Cole, who was waiting with the car, but has his own methods of acquiring information, told me the bump was caused by a man being removed from the dress circle.

4, THURSDAY. *Tuppence Coloured*, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. With Nicholas Phipps and Arthur Macrae to write the most literate lyrics of any revue in London, Richard Addinsell to compose much of the music, Victor Stiebel designing dresses, and Joyce Grenfell, Elisabeth Welch and Max Adrian in the cast, there is on the stage at Hammersmith enough talent to keep three-quarters of London's theatres three-quarters full for three-quarters of the year.

*Tuppence Coloured* is often acid, sometimes sweet, and never low. Mr. Adrian's eccentric signalman, Miss Grenfell's W.V.S. Countess, Miss Welch's trouncing of Sartre are especially to be commended, and I was struck by Mr. Franklin Bennett's poise and worldly assurance in several scenes in which he did nothing very much, but did it rather well.

An explanation of last night's incident. It seems that Mr. Searle wrote a play called *Peace in Our Time*, and is annoyed with Coward for having done the same thing, and refusing to change the title. In retaliation, every time Coward writes a play, Mr. Searle promises to do the same, and give it Coward's title. Whether Mr. Searle's plays will be acted after Coward is dead and forgotten is difficult to say. An easier question to decide is whether they will be acted before.

5, FRIDAY. *The Witches Ride*, at the Torch Theatre. Enter in *Tuppence Coloured* Miss Beryl Seton, with white cadaverous face, and eyes like great black saucers, with misery and anguish whining from every glance and movement. Sepulchrally she announces, "I am an actress from the Torture Theatre," and a vision of all the little playhouses in the London suburbs flashes through the audience's mind, to a roar of delighted laughter.

The satire is obvious and effective. When the imagination flags and the spirit wearies (and this happens occasionally even

to dramatic critics) it is tempting to inquire why, the smaller the theatre, the greater the gloom. In the last six months, on stages so tiny that if an actor as generously proportioned as Mr. Robert Morley chanced to appear there it would have to be a one-man show, I have seen plays about fathers who willed the deaths of their children, plays about the relics of civilization after the atomic war, a play about a man about to be hanged: whilst now the Torch, which must be nearly the smallest of the lot, reopens with Hermann Sudermann's study in demoniac possession. Why, oh why, asks the average playgoer, or the critic from whom the zest has temporarily departed, why, in theatres where the toes are trodden on, must the soul also be trampled?

The answer, of course, is that it is not. A play that communicates the splendour of the human spirit does not depress, even if it ends in the madness and ruin of Lear. I have not been so moved and, properly speaking, so delighted in any theatre this year as I was by *Now Barabbas* . . ., the play about the man condemned to be hanged.

No one, therefore, should be discouraged by the fact that *The Witches Ride* deals with spiritual treachery, cruelty, and black magic. If the dramatist is a man of quality these things will boil up into as appetizing a brew as any others. And that Sudermann is a man of quality has long been attested. Sir Max Beerbohm bestowed on him his man-of-the-world and slightly weary praise. Mr. Bernard Shaw thought him one of the best dramatists of the late nineteenth century. He was for many years the pride of the German stage. His fame resounded through France and Italy, so that Bernhardt and Duse were anxious to appear in his works.

In William Archer he found, it is true, only a tepid admirer. But even Archer was put to some difficulty to prove that he was less good than Ibsen. Sudermann, in the early days of his fame, was played in England in German, in Italian, and in French, and (in English) by Mrs. Patrick Campbell. Yet, apart from one or two revivals of *Magda*, London has seen little or nothing of Sudermann's during the last thirty years. Why is this? And why should he be seen at all?

An answer to both questions is suggested by the current

production of *The Witches Ride*. No one who sees this play at the Torch can fail to appreciate that Shaw's admiration for its author was justified. It is concerned with that never-ceasing battle between good and evil in the personality from which there is no escape by conscientious objection. Whether Marikke, the witch's daughter, will or will not, on midsummer eve, wrench away from her adopted sister her future husband, poses a problem that, in some form or other, has its counterpart in the lives of all of us. The play, then, has a universal interest.

The story is straightforwardly told through cleverly developed dialogue that, though diffuse, is never boring. The relationship between Marikke and the young husband-to-be, Georg, is excitingly explored, and there are passages of rhetoric, such as Georg's impassioned atavistic pagan speech on midsummer eve, that undoubtedly stir the audience. Here is work of quality.

Why then has Sudermann, to whose work England was early and industriously introduced, had so slight a continuing influence on our drama? I have no complete or confident answer, but will merely suggest one thing. In manner Sudermann was a realist. His speeches imitate the rhythm of life: his settings and costumes closely adhere to those of north Germany fifty years ago. But he had a romantic temper. He liked to write about temperamental prima donnas of world-wide fame, about Bohemianism, about the baleful madness of midsummer night. The British theatre in the first years of this century had its realists and its romantics, its Granville Barkers and its Barries. But they were divorced from each other. Is it possible that in the event, Sudermann's romanticism alienated the first, and his realism the second?

However that may be, the performance of *The Witches Ride* is first-class. Miss Kathleen Michael's Marikke is very notable, and Mr. John Glen's Georg craggily eloquent. London is full of people who declare the commercial stage to be too trivial for them. It would be delightful to see them prove their sincerity by besieging the doors of the Torch during the next few days.

Theatre. The evening really began for me at nine-thirty, when Miss Binnie Hale briefly, excitingly, broke into those high kicks (miracles of athletics and grace) with which she once enchanted us in *Spread a Little Happiness*. I liked, too, the vapouring company chairman of Mr. Charles Heslop, Mr. Anthony Hayes's smooth naivety, and the fresh prettiness of Miss Marie Sellar. Down the years I have seen innumerable pleasing ingenues and chorus girls. Of many thousand misses, this young lady is certainly not the poor last.

Near the end of Charles Heslop's chairman speech, an inconsequential, feather-brained affair, but amiable enough, the gallery got very noisy, and there were shouts of "Shut up." Whether this courteous protest came from Conservatives who thought Mr. Heslop was caricaturing the aristocracy (he was supposed to be Lord Somebody or other), or from Socialists to whom the very sight of a lord, even a lord being guyed, is an offence, I don't know; but it was embarrassing.

When Binnie Hale made her first high kick—the tip of her shoe nearly went over her shoulder—there was terrific applause, as if Methuselah had broken into a gallop. I don't know whether Miss Hale was pleased about this or not.

Beverley Baxter and Ivor Brown very properly reprove the gallery for its behaviour. The *Evening Standard* editorially then improperly reproves Mr. Brown and Mr. Baxter on the ground that in attempting to suppress the gallery's opinion they are undemocratic. This misses the point. No one disputes the gallery's right to express its opinion by booing. But it should boo in the proper place, which is the end of the performance. The *Standard* quotes Lamb as booing at the end of his own play *Mr. H*—, as though this gave the gallery the right to boo in the middle of someone else's. It would be more to the point to compare what Lamb wrote about modern gallantry. "I shall believe that we are a gallant nation," said Lamb, "I shall believe that the principle actuates our conduct, when I can forget, that in the nineteenth century of the era from which we date ourselves, we are but just beginning to leave off the very first rudiments of whipping females in public, in common view, and that the same principle should not male offenders."

"I shall believe that the principle actuates our conduct, when I can shut my eyes





Margaret Leighton  
and Robert Donat  
in *A Sleeping Clergyman*

(Criterion)

Clifford Mollison's  
production of the  
play by John  
Galsworthy, which  
was first staged in  
1928, is a fine  
example of the  
type of production  
which the Criterion  
Company has made  
its specialty.

Clifford Mollison's  
production of the  
play in



The  
1928

The jury returned a verdict for the plaintiff, and assessed the damages against the two defendants at £50 jointly.

11, THURSDAY. *School for Spinsters*, at the Criterion Theatre. Tyrannical father, lover sent off to the wars, and a pretty girl declining into an old maid, with a chorus girl on the fringes of the plot, make Mr. Roland Pertwee's *School for Spinsters* into a sort of *Barretts of Quality Street*, with an infusion of *A Little Bit of Fluff*. Miss Iris Hoey, Mr. Julien Mitchell, and Miss Sheila Sim—and the play—would be charming, if only one could keep awake.

17, WEDNESDAY. *The Farmer's Wife*, at the Apollo Theatre. Amusing.

18, THURSDAY. *Happy as Larry*, at the Mercury Theatre. "Modern realism is the one thing that has vitality, present and future vitality." So wrote the most urbane of living dramatic critics. Mr. Martin Browne, whose Pilgrim Players are presenting Donagh MacDonagh's *Happy as Larry*, hardly believes that statement, or he would not, with such indefatigable persistence, attempt to force upon the Town, by way of a comparatively distant suburb, his apparently inexhaustible progression of poetic plays.

Yet, in its day, which now is nearly fifty years ago, Sir Max Beerbohm's assertion was undoubtedly true. The lesson of Ibsen has been thoroughly learnt; Granville Barker, Galsworthy, and a host of others put it over and over again into successful operation; and Mr. Browne may well believe that the time has come to throw it away. The old truths vanish, giving place to new.

From one consideration he may take hope and comfort. When Sir Max made his stern assertion realism was certainly not ascendant in the fashionable theatres of the West End, nor did the most eminent actors profess any allegiance to it. Around that time Forbes-Robertson preferred to dally with a Japanese romance about moonlight blossoms; Martin-Harvey palely fluttered through a piece of fairy tale called *Ib and Little Christina*; George Alexander swam through seas of Ruritanian

romance; the great theatres were in the main devoted to make-believe and almond icing. The realism of which Sir Max entertained such splendid hopes had as yet firmly established itself only in hidden corners and remote fastnesses of the theatre. The future of the drama lay not in Drury Lane or the St. James's, but in such places as J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre.

The future of the drama? But the future of the 1890's and the 1900's is the past of 1947. Mr. Browne is well entitled to have his soul possessed by that obvious truth. Nor need he be cast down because it is pieces like *Perchance to Dream* and *Oklahoma!* that attract to-day half a million or a million playgoers. Like the rest of us, he no doubt enjoys them, without thinking them the most significant form of theatrical entertainment. But they are no worse than the ancient choices of Martin-Harvey and Forbes-Robertson, over which the Independent Theatre was signally to triumph. The Mercury also is a remote fastness; it is hidden in a corner. Will it, too, triumph—even over Mr. Novello? Will it sing a louder song than "Oh, what a beautiful mornin'"?

Up to now I have seen little chance of it. Its cathedral murders have not excited me. I have steadily refused to take its way to the tomb. Its shadow factories have darkened my spirit, and its psychological studies of prisoners of war sent me off at a tangent to an early dinner. It has seemed to me that its poetic plays have not often been the work of poets. Of thinkers, yes; of theological scholars; of men of delicate aesthetic sensibility; of political philosophers; of almost anybody except poets. They have been in many ways excellent. You could get out of them any amount of stimulating suggestions, any amount of intellectual exercise. What you could not get out of them—what at least I could not get out of them—was poetry.

The Mercury is probably—it is no overwhelming compliment—the brainiest theatre in London. I think that is its mistake. Wherever poetry comes from, it doesn't come from the brain. It intoxicates, or it is nothing. I have come out of the Mercury, as I have gone in, stone-cold sober. Therefore I say that up to now I have seen no reason, much as I respect

and admire Mr. Browne's achievement, to suppose that the Mercury has a millionth chance of being the Independent Theatre of our day.

But now I am not so sure. Now Mr. Browne has presented a play that sings from the very rising of the curtain. *Happy as Larry* is as obviously, as thrillingly, full of poetry as a lyric of Walter de la Mare's.

It is as easy to comprehend as one of Mr. Robertson Hare's farces. It is as moving—very nearly—as *O, My Love's like a Red, Red Rose*. It is a play to be seen, and to be seen again. Mr. MacDonagh has written it out of music, and feeling, and wonder, and out of humour, too; and the result is an evening of rare delight.

His story, like his poetry, is simple. Larry brings home to his wife a young widow who has sworn not to marry again till the clay on her husband's grave is dry. To the wife this seems wantonness: these, she says:

. . . are no thoughts to speak or even to think  
Lest someone pin them to the page with ink  
And spread them through the land to end all mourning  
And end all patient love with ribald scorning.

Yet when a melodramatic doctor poisons Larry, she is willing enough to marry the murderer. Marry, however, she does not; for Larry is revived, and it is his wife and the doctor who die. What marriage there is, is between Larry and the widow. It is a happy marriage, for the saucy widow was, despite appearances, a good woman, and the last words of the play are;

Her children neat and her home all shining,  
Hers was the gold past all refining,  
And, son, my wish for you when you marry  
Is that you may be as happy as Larry.

Mr. Denis Carey has produced the play: and from the fact that every member of the company gets every intonation, every pause or hurry, right, I conclude he must have produced it superbly.

*Telegraph*. "Lively and amusing." (W. A. Darlington.)

Theatrical attention is concentrating in London just now on the amount of money being paid to American plays and artistes. *Born Yesterday*, *Life With Father*, *Separate Rooms*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Deep Are The Roots*, and to a lesser extent *Oklahoma!* all take dollars out of the country at a time when dollars are sorely needed, and when the import of films is crippling taxed.

The matter has been brought to a head by the American coloured team of close-harmony singers (whatever that may mean), the Inkspots. Breaking the firmest of theatrical traditions, that the show in all circumstances must go on, the Inkspots on Tuesday, September 16, failed to turn up at the Lewisham Hippodrome, where they were due to appear. Bernard Delfont has brought them to the Casino at a weekly salary of £2,500, and there seems to have been an understanding that they would also appear nightly elsewhere for an additional £125. The Inkspots say this agreement was for three shows a night; Mr. Delfont says four. Four is too many, say the Inkspots; their stamina won't stand it. With the whole country clamouring for higher wages and shorter hours, this is not a particularly good moment for Britain to take a superior line in this matter. Nevertheless, the girls at the Windmill do five shows a day, and don't get £2,500 a week for it either. Theatrical correspondents this morning fasten their teeth into the question of how much of our money American entertainers are taking away.

*Oklahoma!* is probably taking more money than any other show. It reaches its 200th performance in a week's time. It has been seen by 460,000 people, taken £166,000 at the box-office, and paid £60,000 in entertainment tax. The box-office holds £16,000 in advance bookings, and the libraries account for another £14,000. These figures are said to be records for Drury Lane. In theory, since most of this money is convertible into dollars, it would seem that *Oklahoma!* must be one of the chief despoilers of the Treasury. But this apparently is not so. The greater part of the money is spent here, and the profits are to be used by the American Theatre Guild, which presents the show, to finance other entertainments in this country. Anyway, the Drury Lane management, which lost £28,000

on its first post-war show, Noel Coward's *Pacific, 1860*, is not worrying overmuch about these things.

Last night Mae West, who is bringing her own play, *Diamond Lil*, to England, arrived in London. When her ship docked at Southampton, it is said to have taken her an hour to get her face ready to meet the Press. It is also said that it was worth the wait. Miss West displayed shoulder-length platinum curls, two-inch false eyelashes, the new blue-pink lipstick, and her famous "come and get me" smile. She wore a figure-revealing, calf-length, black silk dress, wedge-soled shoes with six-inch heels, a diamond bracelet five inches long, and a diamond ring the size of a pigeon's egg. She has brought with her 150 dresses and 50 pairs of shoes. Asked why she has never married, she replied, "Because it would interfere with my hobby."

"What is your hobby?"

"Men."

21, SUNDAY. Among recent invitations to act as adjudicator of an Essex play competition, join a Brains Trust, judge another play competition run by Civil Servants, and address the prisoners at Wormwood Scrubs, I accepted the Brains Trust. This was at Henley, where the local repertory company is finding the struggle hard. The Trust consisted of Clifford Bax, Celia Johnson, Eric Gillett (question-master), Mary Field, Ronald Neame, and myself. We were asked to give a bias in favour of the theatre over the cinema. Gillett was a superb question-master, urbane, witty, and clear-headed. Bax was courtly, ironical, and cogent, Miss Field well-informed and intelligent, and Miss Johnson charmingly natural and spontaneous.

Since the idea was to boost the theatre it was a strategic blunder of the worst order to put Mr. Neame on to the Trust. Neame directed that admirable film, *Great Expectations*, and he was so much quicker than any of the other four members of the Trust in establishing friendly relations with the audience (which filled the theatre), so much wittier, so much easier in manner, that he passed the evening to an unceasing riot of applause. Whereas, of course, he ought obediently to have lain down and let us theatre-goers jump on him.

As it was, the cinema enjoyed a complete triumph. An example of his quickness: Bax, making gentle fun of the cinema, recalled how a romantic costume play of his own had been made into a film a long time ago. "The chief part," he said, "was played by Dolores del Rio—in beads." Neame broke in, assuring Bax that films had greatly improved since then. "Nowadays," he said with every appearance of seriousness, "beads would not be worn." This set the house rocking with laughter.

The most interesting question that came my way was, Why do plays have long runs sometimes when critics damn them? Partly, perhaps, because critics and ordinary playgoers ask themselves different questions when they go to a theatre. Most theatre-goers ask, Is this the kind of play that I like? If it is, they are ready to go a long way towards excusing it even if it is bad. The critic, on the other hand, ought to say to himself, Is this a good play of its kind? If it is, he will praise it; if not, not. The result may be that a tragedy which he approves may come off in a week, and a farce he condemns run for a year.

Even so, I think people tend to exaggerate the number of successful plays that the critics have damned. Millionaires like to believe they began their working lives with only sixpence in their pockets; and managers of successful plays like to think they have triumphed without any help from outside. Miss Johnson said the only play she knew which had succeeded after appalling notices was *The Farmer's Wife*. Gillett added *Young England*. I suggested *Abie's Irish Rose*, but this was in New York. On the subject of exaggeration, I recalled that at a Critics Circle function not long ago Jack Hulbert said a review of Ivor Novello's *Perchance to Dream* was headed "No, No, Novello," implying that this piece simply wouldn't do. It has run for well over two years, and will have been seen by more than a million people when it is withdrawn next month. The sort of hold it has over certain kinds of audience is shown in the fact that three women have seen it twice a week since it was first performed, paying £750 for the privilege. But I think Mr. Hulbert's memory deceives him. A similar title was certainly used by James Agate not long ago. But it was in

connection with Noel Coward's *Pacific*, 1860 at Drury Lane. This provoked Agate into saying, "No, No, Noel," and the piece lost £28,000.

23, TUESDAY. *Queen Mary*, at the Gateway Theatre. A friend asks me whether, during the last three weeks, I have not exaggerated the importance of the outlying theatres at the expense of the playhouses of the West End. "It began," he said, "when you saw that piece of Sudermann's in an attic in Kensington. What are you seeing this week?"

"Tennyson's *Queen Mary*," I replied, "in a basement in Bayswater."

The last time that this play had a run in London was in 1876 at the Lyceum, with Irving as Philip of Spain. It was greeted with respect but no enthusiasm. Clement Scott found it lacking in warmth. Joseph Knight thought that from the shortened version played on the stage the best of Tennyson's poetry was omitted. A third playgoer, years afterwards, could remember nothing of this production—though details of Irving's other parts were vivid in his memory—except "the figure of Philip standing before a great fireplace, sinister and terrifying, the very embodiment of a Velazquez."

The Gateway does not give us this sinister and terrifying figure: even the fireplace is missing. The part of Philip is only a small one, and, in Mr. Tom Cornish's light and supercilious performance, it seems perhaps smaller than it is. But Miss Caroline Keith's *Queen Mary* is an ambitious and not unsuccessful effort. Miss Keith has a surprising resemblance to Miss Athene Seyler. She has the same nods and becks and wreathed smiles; the same wailing voice, rising and falling like the wind through distant trees: the same tricks of subtle posturing; even the same profile. But what Miss Seyler turns to laughter, Miss Keith uses for tragedy, for her passionate hunger for the unresponsive Philip, for her burning hatred of heretics. And I repeat that she is not unsuccessful.

But my friend's question keeps returning to me. Yet the answer is plain enough. If I have written little lately about the West End, it is because there has been little to write about in the West End. There has been a great lack of first nights.



Moreover, the small suburban theatres—the coterie theatres—have been producing work of interest and significance. They have given us *The Witches Ride*, *Happy as Larry*, *Queen Mary*; and if two of these plays are not new, they are at least new to contemporary London.

There are more than thirty theatres open in the West End, but it would be hard to match this short list from among them. In plays like *Edward My Son*, *Present Laughter*, *The Chiltern Hundreds*, *Dr. Angelus*, *Deep Are the Roots*, and some others, there is excellent entertainment; there are also some first-class musicals. But is there any piece that, seventy years hence, will be played even by a coterie theatre, even in an attic? Mr. Priestley's *Linden Tree*, and *Ever Since Paradise*? Possibly, though I do not think they are Mr. Priestley's best work. But certainly nothing else. The others are having their day of deserved success; and then into the night go one and all.

This, however, is not in itself necessarily a condemnation of the commercial theatre, which is far too often thoughtlessly criticized. The theatre, it should be remembered, is a wider thing than the drama; theatrical art can flourish when the contemporary drama flags. The great ages of the English theatre are the Elizabethan, the Restoration, the age of Garrick, the age of Kean, the age of Irving, and the first years of the present century. Three of those halcyon periods were made by dramatists: and three by actors, by actors, moreover, who did practically nothing to assist worthwhile contemporary writers.

Nor should they be blamed for this neglect. Art is the expression of a vision of life. In the theatre, if the vision be a high one, it does not matter whether it is the actor's vision or the dramatist's. Irving was right to play in *The Bells*; Martin-Harvey was right to play in *The Only Way*. Their contribution to the living theatre was valid, just as, in a different way, Mr. Shaw's, or Mr. Priestley's, is valid. The theatre can live if it has great plays; and it can live if it has poorish plays, but great acting.

At the moment I should say that acting in the West End is very good, but that it falls short of greatness. Many things are taking place nightly on stages between the St. James's

and Drury Lane that I recall with delight: that tender, foolish, drunken telephone conversation Mr. Noel Morris so finely holds in *The Crime of Margaret Foley*; Mr. Brian Reece's shy longing to be bold and brave and magnanimous in Sir Alan Herbert's *Bless the Bride*; M. Georges Guétary's splendidly spirited singing of *Marguerite* in the same piece; Miss Margaret Auld Nelson's yellow-pigtailed girl in *Oklahoma!*, making her long silence eloquent of all the poignancy of childhood; the fine flamboyance, the perfect self-possession of Mr. Robert Morley in *Edward, My Son*; the casual good breeding, the delicate comedy of Mr. A. E. Matthews's peer in *The Chiltern Hundreds*: these things, and others, have given me much pleasure.

For greatness, however, one wants something more: an illumination of the mind, an opening of windows on new experience.

We have had such matters in the past: we shall have them again. At the moment the West End is below its full acting strength. Mr. Gielgud is in America. Sir Laurence Olivier and Sir Ralph Richardson are filming. They are reversing Burke, in giving up to mankind what was meant for the West End. Doubtless all three will return, and the theatre will flourish even if—which I do not for one moment believe—the dramatists do not. And there is to be the return of the Old Vic, with Miss Celia Johnson, Mr. Alec Guinness, and Mr. Trevor Howard. I look forward to their arrival with the liveliest expectation.

# OCTOBER 1947

1, WEDNESDAY. *The Raven*, at the Boltons Theatre. When this play about Edgar Allen Poe opens, the stage is a blaze of sunshine. Light streams in everywhere, through the window, through the open door. When Poe appears, framed blackly in that doorway, black in expression and in bearing as in clothes, the effect is of a sudden eclipse. Mr. Richard Longman never loses the pace this admirable beginning gives him, and is throughout excellent.

A most spirited and agreeable letter arrives from an unknown correspondent, signing herself Mary Martin, and self-described as "a very old woman." Mrs. Martin, after pleasantly saying that "there is no critic in England to whom I give a more glad greeting as Mr. Agate's successor," declares that in the main she accepts what I say in my article on *Queen Mary*, but that it seems to her "that our contemporary critics are inclined to dwell too lazily on a prodigality of praise for our *established* actors." Is it not a critic's duty to pick out and encourage the stars of the future? "You would say, perhaps," she continues, "'I cannot remember one who seems worthy'—but you must think again."

Mrs. Martin then produces her potential genius. It is Robert Eddison.

2, THURSDAY. *Richard II*, at His Majesty's Theatre. "*Richard II*," said Hazlitt, "is a play little-known compared with *Richard III* . . . yet we confess that we prefer the nature and feeling of the one to the noise and bustle of the other." So, too, was *Richard II* neglected by the great actors of the later part of the nineteenth century. In the forty-two years between



in which the eloquent, faint-hearted king, aloft upon the walls of Flint Castle, tumbles from the height of his triumphant assertion of divine assistance to an affrighted recognition of the horrors which he himself is summoning (Mr. Harris's face blanches and freezes as he speaks); these are only three passages among several which I have never known finer done. I salute Mr. John Ruddock, Mr. Myles Eason and Mr. Harris for them.

Hazlitt's own explanation of the appeal of *Richard II* was that "the sufferings of the man make us forget that he ever was a king." This is a reason that might well commend itself to an age rabid for equality: except that it is not true. In the philosophic sense, Mr. Harris's Richard indeed is not a king. This Richard designedly has not authority. When he casts down his staff at the tourney between Bolingbroke and Norfolk the gesture does not dominate: it is lost in a huddle of courtiers. He responds to the accusations of Gaunt, not with a royal rage, but with an hysterical exasperation. So far Hazlitt is right: it is not the kingliness of kings that Richard exemplifies. Richard up is not royal: but Richard down is another matter.

He is not royal, then, even. He pities himself too much: he laments with too sweet, too Tennysonian a sorrow. But he creates, out of the artistic fecundity of his mind, the image of a king who *has* been royal. His fall does not remind him of the fundamental brotherhood of man: it convinces him with a luscious tenacity that the colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are *not* the same under the skin. Paradoxically though Richard never is a king, in his fall he wholly believes that he had been a king. There is no democratic message here.

Self-pity: lamentation: hysteria. We come closer to the secret of *Richard II*'s popularity in such considerations as these. We have lost the robust confidence of the nineteenth century. The world to-day darts hither and thither directionless. It grieves over the hardness of its fate, just as Richard did. Of all Shakespeare's kings, he is its prime spokesman. And, if not with spirit, if not with courage, he speaks beautifully, with words that twine about the heart. Let us not be hard upon him, though. But we might well be harder upon ourselves.

3, FRIDAY. *You Never Can Tell*, at Wyndham's Theatre.

There is a charming film star, Miss Rosamund John, in the cast, but her part, Gloria, is a small one, and the balance of the play is not much upset. Miss Brenda Bruce as the bouncing Dolly Clandon, Mr. Harcourt Williams as the tactful Waiter, Mr. D. A. Clarke-Smith as the Q.C. (solemn and sharp) and Mr. Ernest Thesiger as the Solicitor (solemn and silly), are superb. Mr. Holland's hotel terrace set is a brilliant exercise in light.

To get into Wyndham's to see *You Never Can Tell* one had to push one's way through the gaping crowds that assemble when film stars are expected to be in the audience. As I have said, there is a film star in the cast, Miss Rosamund John, as Gloria, the advanced girl who will not believe in love until it is termed a system of chemical reactions. When she came on to the stage there was a considerable burst of applause, though her part is a comparatively small one, and her acting ability (so far as the theatre is concerned—I say nothing of the films) is less than that of several other members of the company.

Now this sort of thing brings up a problem. When a film star is in the cast of a play, a large part of the audience comes to see, not the play, but the player. There is nothing wrong in that. It used to happen with Irving, with Martin-Harvey, with Matheson Lang, with Marie Tempest, and scores of others. But then Irving and these others were in their element on the stage: they had it in them to give what the audience came to see. But film stars are not at home on the stage; they are fishes out of water. In consequence their admirers are disappointed, and go away thinking—what? That film stars can't act? Not a bit. But that the theatre is, as they had always suspected, poor fun.

I thought this was going to happen during the first act of *You Never Can Tell*. James Donald's Valentine (Mr. Donald, I see from the programme, is appearing by permission of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) lacked ease and certainty, and the production seemed sticky. But with the opening of the second act, with the applause that greeted Holland's set for the hotel terrace, the play got into its stride. Gloria was seen in her proper proportions in the play, and everything thereafter went very well. At the end the shouts for "Author, author," must have been heard as far away as Ayot St. Lawrence.

Even so the evening ended on a note of embarrassment. Harcourt Williams as the Waiter had had probably the biggest success of the evening, but in response to the cries of speech, he tried to edge Miss John forward. Miss John, who had given a really competent performance, modestly realized that for the player of one of the smaller parts to behave as if she had carried the whole production on her shoulders was rather absurd, and shyly declined to speak. And the curtain came down without any speeches at all.

During the interval C. B. Cochran told me that *You Never Can Tell* had been offered to Richard Mansfield, the American actor, with whom Mr. Cochran worked as a young man, twelve years before it was produced. Mansfield's reason for refusing it was that you can't popularize a dentist in America.

4, SATURDAY. To Hertford to see the Hertford Dramatic and Operatic Society in Frank Vosper's adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Love From a Stranger*. In this amateur show my sister-in-law, Muriel Kindell, was very good, very funny as the interfering aunt who can only be got out of the house on the promise of tea at Gunter's: Nicola Swanson, as the girl who finds herself married to a murderer, was charming to look at, and easy and natural in manner. Altogether the production was very creditable, and I enjoyed it as much as the original presentation in London.

The truth is that *Love From a Stranger* is a very bad play. Agatha Christie's notion of the murderer's intended victim turning the tables by announcing that she is a murderess, and working away at the murderer's nerves and weak heart, is an ingenious twist, but it is sufficient only for a short story. Actually, it occupies only about a quarter of an hour in a two-and-a-half-hour play which isn't any good till it stops killing time, and starts killing killers.

6, MONDAY. *Romeo and Juliet*, at His Majesty's Theatre. The principals in *Romeo and Juliet* not infrequently have to reconcile themselves to the mortification of seeing the chief honours carried off by a subsidiary character. Often enough the splendid thief is Mercutio. When Dame Edith Evans played her, it was

the Nurse. But this year's Stratford production is probably the first in the play's long history in which the eye's cynosure, and the ear's solace, is the lean and furious Tybalt.

For this Mr. Peter Brook, who directs the play, is almost as much responsible as is Mr. Myles Eason. Whatever in *Romeo and Juliet* has moved Mr. Brook is turned into the fire and the fighting in the streets. Those passionate songs of lust and love that Juliet and Romeo breathe and sigh would, says a respected commentator rather ungallantly, excite "even a despairing old maid"; but they have not excited Mr. Brook. It is the flash of swords in hot streets, where every glance is either a provocation or an insult, where the blood is always quarrelling, that thrills his imagination; and all the life of this production is packed into the burning pavements under the glaring sun.

In such a setting, Tybalt is the very man to thrive and flourish. His eye searches for brawls, his fingers itch for the pommel. Mr. Eason makes him frail and dark and evil; he is thin-lipped, and looks as cruel as the sea. He is green-cloaked as a cat is green-eyed. He struts and postures like a dancing-master; but he fights like a tiger, and has a soul whose pestilential thirst all the blood in Verona would not slake. And when he fights, he fights to win. He thinks no more of honour than Falstaff did. The thrust under Romeo's arm by which he dispatches Mercutio is no stroke to boast of in ladies' boudoirs. D'Artagnan would not have delivered it, nor the clod-hopping Mr. Henry; but the Master of Ballantrae might. And as the Master controls the imagination, so does this Tybalt chain the eye.

The competition is not strong. It seems odd to say this, when Mercutio is played by so admirable an actor as Mr. Paul Scofield, surely one of the most promising of our younger players. Mercutio is an excellent part; Mr. Scofield is an excellent actor, but their excellences do not match, except in the one burst of Queen Mab's familiar poetry, which Mr. Scofield beautifully speaks out of a grave, moonstruck fancy.

For the rest, Mercutio is a sensualist, a jolly, loose-living fellow, whom every man must like and every woman like and fear. Now, Mr. Scofield's pale and bony countenance, his dry



and melancholy voice, which is meditation made articulate, are about as sensual as Mont Blanc. They are as heady as soda-water. Mr. Scofield therefore presents a Mercutio who truly has dreamed of fairies, but has never, no, not once, peeped down into bodices. An interesting, even a pleasing, figure, but not Shakespeare's.

And Romeo and Juliet? After all, the play is, by title, theirs. Juliet, I thought, was much improved from her performance at Stratford at Easter. Miss Daphne Slater brings her a childlike innocence, a fresh youthfulness, that is at first engaging, then poignant, and finally incongruous. But that, perhaps, is Shakespeare's fault. For Juliet says some of the oddest things that ever fell from a nice girl's lips. In a much less elaborate production of the play some weeks ago at the Boltons, Miss Isabel Dean managed these difficult speeches with magnificent, with almost alarming, fire and passion; but here Miss Slater pays the penalty of her attractive youth. As the hot words burn her mouth she seems like a precocious child babbling of things she doesn't understand. As for Mr. Laurence Payne's Romeo, I wish I could praise it. But I can do no more than recall that Irving also failed in the part.

8, WEDNESDAY. *The Dubarry*, at the Princes Theatre. Where is Bohun? Where Plantagenet? Where, and most of all, is Anny Ahlers? Miss Irene Manning does very nicely, but when she sings, "I Give My Heart," it seems just an ordinary song. It is fifteen years since I heard that pure voice, saw the long, sallow, painted face, the tired eyes, the tall, gawky figure, not even moderately pretty, from which one could no more take one's eyes than from a seraph or a boa-constrictor—but I become garrulous. And it is unfair to Miss Manning to listen to those echoes, to watch that compelling ghost. As the Comte Dubarry, Mr. Barry Mackay again hangs a distinguished portrait in a tawdry gallery.

9, THURSDAY. *The Man in the Street*, at the St. James's Theatre. A sad little evening. Mr. Geoffrey Kerr has written entertaining plays before, and he will write entertaining plays again; but this story of the mammoth newspaper trying to find the

average man had best be forgotten. It is full of a muddle-headed kindness, and assembles many jests about newspapers, bank clerks, mothers-in-law, and the stinginess of the rich, which I think I have heard before. Most of the evening, when I was not sympathizing with Mr. Bobby Howes's mildly meritorious, or meritoriously mild, performance of the principal character, I was wondering whether I preferred Mr. Kerr's jokes, which are chestnuts, to his politics, which are platitudes. But I came to no decision.

14, TUESDAY. *Dark Summer*, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammer-smith. What is the most chivalrous thing you ever heard of? Sir Philip Sidney's glass of water for the dying soldier at Zutphen? That character in Lamb who was as polite to old apple-women as to duchesses? Or the fine, and even finical, George Herbert, on his way to the music practice in Salisbury, taking off his embroidered coat to get down into the mud to help a poor carter whose horse had fallen?

For myself, I think rather of Colonel Hutchinson—that Colonel Hutchinson who, though a Roundhead, used to curl his hair so that it "was an ornament to him"—who, as soon as his young woman was recovered from the small pox, married her when she was so hideous from its ravages that even the clergyman who performed the ceremony was afraid to look at her.

Now if there is one thing that experience proves, it is that physical beauty has little to do with physical love, and still less with any other: though those who do not possess it may feel more than a passing doubt on the matter. Poor Cyrano gave up hope because of his long nose; and the blinded Stephen Hadow in Mr. Wynyard Browne's *Dark Summer* might be excused for some trepidation whilst waiting to meet his fiancée for the first time since his disfigurement.

The blinded sailor, whom Mr. Dan Cunningham plays handsomely (yes, handsomely is the word), recalls Mr. Maugham's *For Services Rendered*; and, as the opening act of Mr. Browne's drama unfolds itself, other recollections crowd upon us. I have already mentioned *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The refugee cook, Gisela, who is also Stephen's nurse, is plainly in

love with him: like the nurse in another play of Mr. Maugham's, *The Sacred Flame*. Mr. Browne may well, in fact, be considered a Maugham student, for the fiancée's father had left her mother, not for another woman, but simply because he was bored, a fleeting echo of *The Moon and Sixpence*.

But when the fiancée appears, and Stephen's mother, a business-like old lady with strong religious feelings, quite out of the usual run of Miss Jean Cadell's characters, forces the girl, in her possessive affection, out of the house, we leave the Maugham country for the territory of *The Silver Cord*.

Any play that A. B. Walkley saw used to remind him of others; and authors were extremely annoyed, scenting a charge of plagiarism. Nothing could be more absurd. It is as nearly impossible as makes no matter to invent a new situation or a new character; thousands of years ago we were assured that there is nothing new under the sun. What is important is that the situation or the character should seem new, that your young lovers should be as though Romeo and Juliet had never existed. It is no argument against the wonder of the sun setting in a bath of crimson and gold that it has done it millions of times before.

In his first act, and in the beginning of his second, I do not think that Mr. Browne brings off this miracle of re-creation; but he is constantly hovering upon the verge. Then, half-way through the play, the wonder happens, the glory comes. After the fiancée has left, Gisela (Jewish, ugly, elderly and fat) makes Stephen a long declaration of love (yes, yes, it has all happened before: Miss Flora Robson and Sir Ralph Richardson magnificently played a similar scene in *For Services Rendered*). But this is not repetition, any more than a heraldic and bannered sunset is a repetition; it is a fresh, it is a unique experience; and I defy anyone to listen to it unmoved.

Here Miss Joan Miller, nobly assuming both a foreign accent and a highly unbecoming make-up, so unerringly drives at the heart of affection that the audience is swept off its feet. Her slow speech and her outlandish intonation have a bizarre music; they fascinate like the song of the sirens, till in this scene they throw down the last barriers to emotion, as the trumpets of Joshua threw down the walls of Jericho. There-

after, the play is triumphant; and Miss Miller acts out a story of self-sacrifice with superb, with heart-rending effect.

I have only one complaint to make. In his attacks on religion I think that Mr. Browne is less than just. The Puritan has much to answer for; he is often sour and uncharitable; but so are many people who are not Puritans. And Puritanism is not the only sort of religion. I am tired of hearing that the religion whose central doctrine is love is the world's chief source of hate; of listening to politicians (whose own brilliant success the earth's present condition so strikingly illustrates) explaining that the churches have failed. I would have Mr. Browne remember that, if the possessive, the evil-imputing Mrs. Hadow is religious, George Herbert was a parson: and Colonel Hutchinson that thing of scorn, a Puritan. But the play is fine; Miss Miller more than fine: and both should be seen in the West End.

A correspondent from Regent's Park to-day writes to me that the words "Irving also failed in the part" caught his eye in my notice of *Romeo and Juliet*. "Irving's Romeo was before my time," he goes on, "but having seen him constantly since 1895 till the time of his death I believe I should have liked his Romeo. No doubt it was awkward and angular *outside*, but I think he must have suggested the poetry and beauty of the lines more fully than any of the Romeos I have seen, including Forbes-Robertson."

Personally I should doubt this. The one thing on which most critics agree about Irving is that he had no voice. "The trouble with Irving," said Bernard Shaw the last time I saw him, a couple of years ago, "is that he had no chest." But equally without doubt, even as Romeo, Irving must have achieved some fine effects. Shaw, who was not given to over-praising Irving, compares him favourably with the gentlemanly behaviour of Forbes-Robertson's Romeo in the tomb. Forbes-Robertson's Romeo, says Mr. Shaw, "was a gentleman to the last. He laid out Paris after killing him as carefully as if he were folding up his best suit of clothes. One remembers Irving, a dim figure dragging a horrible burden down through the gloom 'into the rotten jaws of death,' and reflects on the differences of imaginative temperament that underlie the differ-

ences of acting and stage-managing." There is impressiveness here, there is that feeling of evil which, by all accounts, Irving could so compellingly create: but not much sign of beauty or poetry.

What I had in mind when I said that Irving failed as Romeo was *Punch's* question, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art *thou* Romeo?" But, of course, the failure can only have been comparative.

My correspondent goes on to inquire if I have read Ellen Terry's comments on Irving's Romeo, and especially the reference to William Terriss. A "well-known politician who had enough wit" to know better, says Ellen Terry, came up to her and declared that Terriss, who played Mercutio, was, with his youth and fire and beauty, the obvious man for Romeo.

But "is Romeo necessarily a callow youth, pink and white, of full cheek and clear eye, of shapely limb and rounded contours? The male love-bird? The pretty, if manly, boy?" So asks Henry Pettitt. Terriss supplied the answer. "When dear Terriss," said Ellen Terry, "did play Romeo at the Lyceum two or three years later to the Juliet of Mary Anderson, he attacked the part with a good deal of fire. He was young, truly, and stamped his foot a great deal, was vehement and passionate. But it was so obvious that there was no intelligence behind his reading. He did not know what the part was about, and all the finer shades of meaning in it he missed. Yet the majority, with my political friend, would always prefer a Terriss as Romeo to a Henry Irving." I wonder if they would. In particular, I wonder if Mr. Shaw would.

I ask this because Mr. Shaw has had considerable influence upon the present production of *Romeo and Juliet*. I went on to the Ivy with my mother after the performance of *Dark Summer*. I thought there was something familiar in the profile of a young man at the next table, though I didn't recognize his clothes. After a little while, he stepped across and thanked me for my notice of *Romeo and Juliet*. He was Myles Eason, "translated" by the difference between lounge clothes and the doublet and hose of Tybalt. The point is that he said that Peter Brook, the producer, asked Shaw about *Romeo and Juliet*, and Shaw told him to concentrate on young lovers and hard fighting.

Brook has done both these things. Laurence Payne (long dark hair, sallow complexion, a little man) is as near twenty as thirty, and Daphne Slater as near fifteen as twenty. But Shaw must know that youth in itself is not enough. He himself, in one of the best and liveliest pieces of dramatic criticism ever written, implies as much in what he says about the death of Tybalt, whose part he calls "unmercifully bad." Romeo, says Shaw, should "fall on him with absolute abandonment, and annihilate him as Jean de Reszke used to annihilate Montariol. This is one of the great sensations of the play: unless an actor is capable of a really terrible explosion of rage, he had better let Romeo alone." Such explosions are beyond the capacity of youth; Mr. Payne suggested hardly more than a slight annoyance. Here I suppose Irving to have been very good. "His eyes," it is said, "darted fire. His rapier was a whip. No hope for Tybalt; Romeo was past his guard in a flash."

15, WEDNESDAY. *Tuppence Coloured*, transferred from Hammer-smith to the Globe Theatre. To-day George Richards springs to the defence of *The Man in the Street*. Rapping me over the knuckles again, he says, "*The Man in the Street* was here, i.e. in pyaemic Bournemouth," the week before last. "The title put me off and I went with the worst misgivings, but before the first curtain was down I had written it down a deserved success—and am therefore dismayed (and what is worse: weighed down with a feeling of altruistic grievance) at the slighting notices it has had from the Metropolitan Dramatic Force. . . . It has an idea, not new, but still an idea, which is something nine modern playwrights out of ten forget to include. The said idea is neatly worked out, the lines are pointed (not without wit) and the whole thing is a good job. . . . The Little Man portrayed is something right up Bobby's street, and if only because the play is such a good vehicle for this comedian at the top of his form it provides a worthwhile evening. The scenes between Bobby and Lord Manderley and that wherein the Little Man's broadcast comes through are extremely rich and begat more delighted chuckles in my personal oesophagus than anything on the stage for a long time."

I'm glad to hear of Richards enjoying himself. His letters show him a remarkable man, even without this further proof of being able to extract pleasure from *The Man in the Street*. I must try him at blood from a stone.

21, TUESDAY. *Finian's Rainbow*, at the Palace Theatre. *Finian's Rainbow* is full of things that would make the reputation of an ordinary musical. Yet it is pretty generally agreed to be inferior to its predecessors, *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun*. Why?

One thing is clear. *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Oklahoma!* are packed with racy tunes. They have increased the melodiousness of bathrooms all over the country, and won the appreciation of butchers' boys (alas, a declining community) everywhere. Now in "Great Come-and-get-it Day," *Finian's Rainbow* has a song of the very first class; the elfish "Something Sort of Grandish" has a pleasant, childish charm; but otherwise the music is undistinguished. Yet I don't think music alone is a sufficient answer.

The secret is more likely to be found in unity of idea. The aim of every work of art is to produce some distinct impression on the mind, the heart, or the imagination, an impression to which every detail in that work contributes its appropriate share. It is because musical comedies in the past have been mere assemblages of pretty girls, dances, and heterogeneous jokes slung together without the control of any dominating idea that they have failed to secure recognition in the realm of art. They have been ammunition wagons instead of machine-guns. But the American theatre claims that this reproach is now lifted from musical comedy; and in proof it advances *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun* and indeed *Finian's Rainbow* for our consideration. Well then, how do these three pieces compare?

As regards *Oklahoma!* the claim is certainly just. There is not a movement of the superbly drilled chorus, there is not a note in any of the songs, there is not a splash of paint on those red-roofed barns and yellow cornfields, that does not shout and sing of the play's central theme. That theme is youth: the youth of a young country, bursting with the prodigal fatness

of the earth: the youth of young men and maidens, youth with all the future fair before it, thrilling and throbbing with its unwearable energy, bewitched with its aspirations, and even its heartache, too. This is the dawning of the day. This is the bud of the spring. It is as fresh as is the month of May.

The unifying factor in *Annie Get Your Gun* is a personality. This piece was devised to exploit and illustrate the zip, zest, flair, and fling of Miss Ethel Merman. Coming to England without Miss Merman it might therefore easily have failed. But it had the good luck to find in Miss Dolores Gray a young actress as sweet as honey and with the bite of a bullet. The garment tailored for Miss Merman miraculously fits Miss Gray. There is not a telltale wrinkle anywhere.

Do not mistake me. These entertainments are not masterpieces. They are not among the *Hamlets* and the *Macbeths*. But the palace of art has many rooms: not for them, perhaps, the marble halls; but they may legitimately claim lodgment in some obscure attic, at the top of the last flight of stairs.

The trouble is that in *Finian's Rainbow* one seeks in vain for unity. The piece is made up of two unfused elements. First, there are the cotton fields in the Middle West, with a company of whites and negroes ready at any moment to break into some revivalistic chant, into some febrile, charged, electric dance, with a wailing of voices, and a waving of arms, and a contorting of bodies, half-evangelical, half-orgiastic: a mixture of a ranting preacher and a wild night with the Borgias. The part of the play could hardly be bettered.

But to this America there come an old Irishman and his daughter, bringing a crock of gold out of some ancient legend, pursued by a fanciful leprechaun, all whimsy and whamsy, white magic and unearthly music. These two parts of the play simply do not hang together. Nor is the acting compelling enough, nor the scenery freshly enough painted, to reconcile us to the unsatisfactory marriage.

Not even Mr. Alfie Bass, as the leprechaun, can do it. Though there is, even in his skipping about the stage, a sense of childlike innocence almost irresistible. I left the theatre murmuring those immortal lines:



O Hodgson, Guinness, Allsopp, Bass,  
Names that should be on every infant's tongue!

Odd that I cannot remember any actor called Allsopp or Hodgson.

22, WEDNESDAY. *The Hidden Years*, at the Boltóns Theatre. Stevenson said that marriage may at times be a sort of friendship recognized by the police. Mr. Travers Otway writes about the sort of friendship that is never in any circumstances recognized by schoolmasters. He seems to think that on occasion it ought to be, and whether right or wrong, he presents his argument in a manner dramatically interesting, and with impeccable taste. Ray Jackson plays the younger of two boys sentimentally involved with precocious poignancy; and Mr. Robert Webber's ridiculous mathematics master has a golden moment when in the last act, thinking over his failures, he provokes the question, Who would have thought the old man to have had so much grief in him?

In all the programmes at to-night's opening performance of *The Hidden Years* there was a printed slip asking the audience to wait at the end to hear an announcement from John Wyse. John Wyse runs the Boltóns, which is a small theatre club in Kensington opened about a year ago. When the applause for a play in many ways fine finished, John Wyse came on, looking very solemn. He was wearing a dinner suit, and held in his hand a brick. "This isn't for you," he said, looking at the audience. "It's to remind me." He then put it down behind him in a mysterious manner. After that his first words were, "It is my intention to turn this theatre over to a cinema again at the beginning of next year." There was a sort of gasp from the audience. Then Wyse went on to say that, though the club had 5,000 members at five shillings each, this was no good unless they came to see the performances. It seems they don't do that until they've heard whether the play on at the moment is any good. This kind of cautious wisdom is no use to a tiny, struggling theatre that can only just pay its way if it plays to nearly capacity every night. John Wyse picked up the brick and put it on the floor in front of him. At present the Boltóns staggers along solely on the profits of its bar.

Advance booking is, says Wyse, the only salvation. He then went off rather sadly, carrying the brick with him. Precisely what the point of the brick was, I never discovered.

23, THURSDAY. *Starlight Roof*, at the Hippodrome, is much more successful than *Finian's Rainbow*. There is no question of art here. The modest aim of *Starlight Roof* is to refresh the tired business man, to revive the exhausted Civil Servant, to solace the weary miner up in Town on the spree. And it succeeds. Never have girls been prettier, dancers more dashing and expert, costumes and settings more lavish than in this show: never has Mr. Vic Oliver deprecated his abilities with more complete assurance, or Mr. Fred Emney looked stouter or more ruminative. And if Mr. Oliver's honeymoon with a strip-tease artist is a bit short on taste—well, you can't have everything.

The item in this revue most vociferously applauded was contributed by a little girl of twelve—Julie Andrews—whose name is not on the programme. After the show was over, Robert Nesbitt, the producer, was telling friends in the foyer that, two days before, he took Julie out of the cast, because he felt that so young a child would not fit in with a scene representing a night club. But she persuaded him to let her appear at the dress rehearsal, and was so warmly received that he changed his mind. This young girl—who wears her hair in two plaits—has the throat development of a full-grown woman, and after some agreeable enough nonsense with Mr. Oliver, she bursts into "I am Titania," from *Mignon*, with all the aplomb, and a reasonable imitation of the skill, of a world-renowned coloratura. It was astonishing and, as I remarked to Mr. Cochran, sitting near me, in the interval, also a little frightening.

I think C.B. agreed. But why should there be something disturbing in a young child's being capable of singing physically beyond her years? If Shakespeare is praised for writing things that other men couldn't, shouldn't Julie also be praised for singing what other children can't? But there is a fallacy here: the cases are not on all fours. An essential quality in all art, as Quiller-Couch says of writing, is appropriateness. Now

being able to write good plays is a quality appropriate to a man; but to have the throat development of an adult singer is not appropriate to a small girl. The point about Shakespeare is that he did supremely well what it is perfectly natural for a man to do. But Julie merely does well what it is unnatural for a child to do at all. It is the difference between art and a freak.

I don't expect to be agreed with about this. Hubert Griffith says of Julie, "Pressed on as she is going, she might be a second Deanna Durbin. Withdrawn from the musical comedy racket, and trained carefully and patiently, she might—just possibly—be the leading coloratura soprano of her generation." And George Richards wrote to me yesterday that Hubert Griffith is more often right in his opinion than any other critic. He said, continues Richards, "that *The Man in the Street* is a light comedy that is both truly light and truly comic. He was right about that truly vulgar Front Door and annihilatingly right about the ineffably tedious Anonymous Lover."

28, TUESDAY. *This Virtue*, by Aimée Stuart, at the New Lindsey Theatre. The characters in a play should fit into their background like a key in a lock. It's no use pretending that d'Artagnan occupies the top bedroom in Bullhampton Vicarage; nor is it satisfactory to set a Boccaccio story in Bournemouth. This last is what Mrs. Stuart does, though she spells my second-favourite watering-place Knightsbridge.

Her anecdote of marital distaste concerns a young lawyer who expects to win universal approval, especially from his fiancée, for seducing his best friend's frigid wife. This tale, to make it palatable, wants trappings more richly fanciful, a style more gracefully artificial, than can be provided by Mrs. Stuart's exponents of upper middle-class gentility. Mr. Richard Warner plays the bright barrister with a gay assurance that will also be glib when he gets right into his part.

29, WEDNESDAY. *Anna Lucasta*, at His Majesty's Theatre. The fourteen members of the all-negro cast that presented Mr. Philip Yordan's *Anna Lucasta* acted to-night beneath their extravagances with a fundamental simplicity and dignity; only the audience was slightly (though amiably) absurd.

At this first night there was enough good will in the theatre to make even the proceedings at Lake Success succeed. If any coloured player made a retort of ordinary competence, if Mr. Frederick O'Neal, as the bull-necked and beef-brained bully of the Lucasta household, spat out bits of apple peel as well as speeches, if Mr. Frank Silvera, as the drunken father, fell on the boards with a particularly heavy thump, the performance was at once interrupted with excited spasms of hysterical clapping; and when Miss Betty Haynes, as Mr. O'Neal's wife, uttered a word that has not been heard on the stage since Mr. Anthony Kimmins wrote *While Parents Sleep*, I really thought that the greater part of the house would have expired in an ecstasy of shocked delight.

A large part of the enthusiasm was due to justifiable admiration for some very competent acting. But, as in New York, there seemed superadded a touch of wonder that negroes could act at all, so that one never quite got rid of the feeling of watching a performing seal or a calculating horse.

There is no particular reason why the story that Mr. Yordan tells should be played by negroes at all. It is not a spiritual. It is not a jazz rhythm. There is no throb of Africa in it. The tale of a street walker, ostracized by her family, who is received back again in order to gull a rich simpleton (who is not so simple after all), and finds that true love might redeem her, could just as well be set among pink skins as among coffee-coloured. When you come to think of it, it *has* been set among pink skins, not once but many times. It is one of the oldest theatrical yarns in the world. It is also one of the most effective.

It is effective again in *Anna Lucasta*. The quarrels, recriminations, slatternlinesses of the Lucastas keep the stage as alive as to the squabbles of, shall we say, Lady Gregory's *Workhouse Ward*. The bitter father (Puritan, with a dash of Freud), slamming the door on the erring daughter, no more fails here to startle the simple than he did in a score of Victorian melodramas. The rich young country boy, supposedly ripe for plucking, outwitting the city slickers is always good fun: and Mr. Earle Hyman gives him an engaging rural freshness and virtue, and a robust common sense, that in this case provide

something more. As for the bad girl who is ivory-headed and golden-hearted, she is an ace that can never be trumped. Miss Hilda Simms plays her with spirit.

But would one have liked something more distinctive of black thought and culture: something not only negro, but negroid? In that event, one's aesthetic experience would have been enriched in a way in which it is not enriched now. One would have felt that one had seen something different from the ordinary run of stage production. One would have been made conscious, too, that there is a difference between negro and white, that the Greek is not barbarian, that the bond is not free, and an artistic gain might have been balanced by a social loss.

*Anna Lucasta* is the Declaration of Independence (one of the world's noblest fictions) in action. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men"—not white men only—"are created equal." This doctrine is not preached, it is exemplified, in *Anna Lucasta*. The difference between this play and *Deep Are the Roots* is the difference between a demonstration and a sermon. Ah, you say, but the sermon is a noble sermon, and the demonstration amounts to little more than showing that white men and black goster over the same salacious jokes, and dream the same penny novelettes. It exemplifies equality, but on the wrong level. As to that, I can reply only that the demonstration is amusing.

It is accomplished expertly. Miss Edith Whiteman, as the least important member of the Lucasta household, exquisitely shows that rightness of principle (as doesn't always happen) can be united to goodness of heart. Mr. Silvera plays his enforced invitation to Anna to return with an ashamed and muted loveliness and Mr. O'Neal, in a showy part, glories and burgeons; he bullies like an overgrown school tough, but a child could deceive him.

# NOVEMBER 1947

4, TUESDAY. *The Taming of the Shrew*, at the New Theatre. There comes a moment towards the end of this production which has the force of the whole play behind it. In the ale-house kitchen, the three husbands have, for a wager, sent messages to their wives to attend them. Bianca and the widow refuse, to the discomfiture of Hortensio and Lucentio. Only Katharina, the former shrew, now vinegar sweetened, sugared aloes, obeys, and the entire company, gazing on Petruchio with admiration and astonishment, gapingly wonders what such a miracle can mean.

"Marry, peace it bodes," says Petruchio, "and love, and quiet life."

Mr. Trevor Howard is sitting on a long bench, facing the audience. Behind him is a dim crowd of his fellow strolling players. The stage is in half-darkness. Out of the black shadows the words drop slowly, separated from each other by a long weariness. Suddenly everything that has gone before—the romps, the scuffles, the dedication of nights to noise and wakefulness—is unexpectedly illuminated. For Petruchio is revealed a tired man. His fights with Katharina, holding her in the air upside down, slinging her across his shoulders, pretending that the sun is the moon, that food was made for anything but eating, have left him nearly a spent force. The note of exhausted relief in his voice is unmistakable. This Petruchio could not have kept up the struggle much longer. Had Katharina been a little stubborn, had the vinegar been a little sourer, the aloes just a trifle more bitter, victory would have tipped in the other direction. So easily might *The Taming of the Shrew* have become the feminists' favourite play.

Before this, the Old Vic Company, now fortunately returned to London, had been steadily accumulating a goodly score of points. Mr. Peter Copley's nasal, spring-footed Tranio; Mr. George Relph's unwashed, unshaven, chuckling Grumio; Mr. Harry Andrews's cheerful, chest-clapping Hortensio; the sprightly Bianca of Miss Renée Asherson, are all to be entered on the credit side of a most carefully planned production in which the director, Mr. John Burrell, has increased the part of Christopher Sly the tinker to proportions rarely seen upon the stage.

This has had important consequences which, in my opinion, are not entirely happy. Shakespeare's play is set in the houses of rich gentlefolk. There are banquets, there are gay junketings among young people of wealth and fashion. But Mr. Burrell, taking the hint given to him in the prologue, and magnifying it hugely, presents the story as acted by a group of wandering players in an alehouse kitchen before a bemused and drunken tinker. Where be your rich merchants now, with gold-embroidered gowns, and their bright children with their glittering games and jests? They have all vanished; and in their place is a helter-skelter of strolling actors, aping the wealthy, their wits muddled with beer, and their clothes with sleeping in ditches.

Mr. Burrell has done this no doubt as a matter of deliberate choice. The red noses of his players, their scrambled dresses, the general air of dirty finery that pervades the production are touches of realism intellectually justifiable in a rawly unromantic farce. But they are not essential even if the play is presented as given by strolling actors. For is it not acted before a wretched tinker? And would not such a man be dazzled by even the shabbiest of taffetas, overwhelmed by even the least authentic gentleman? Within the bounds, therefore, of Mr. Burrell's determination to keep Sly, in his huge bed, surrounded by tapsters and kitchen women, upon the stage during the whole performance, I see no reason why the indications which the text contains of wealth and salubrity should not be respected. Mr. Burrell, however, has decided otherwise; he makes Mr. Howard give us a Petruchio rufous and seedy, and the beautiful Miss Patricia Burke a Katharina dark and dingy.

This may be in accordance with our new distrust of splendour, with our not wholly unenvious dislike for the flaunting of riches. Personally, I found it disappointing. I should have liked there to be some glory on the stage to distract my attention from the roughness and the lack of kindly feeling in the play. Except in the one moment I have mentioned, I was conscious throughout the performance that *The Taming of the Shrew* is miserable stuff. I can think of no other Shakespearean play that has so little of essential Shakespeare in it.

The mind of Shakespeare is our triumph, Macaulay once exclaimed, and not a dozen lines of rhetoric. The judgment is disputable. Who would exchange such words as

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west

for the dreary philosophy that represents the gods dealing with men as do wanton boys with flies? In *The Taming of the Shrew* the philosophy is even less satisfying, because spiritually more vulgar. It is what we might expect from a man who married unwillingly, deserted his wife at the first opportunity, and when he died left her his second-best bed.

As for rhetoric, nowhere else in Shakespeare is it so poor. *Titus Andronicus* rises to

The eagle suffers little birds to sing  
And is not careful what they mean thereby;

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* has "The uncertain glory of an April day." But the best line in *The Taming of the Shrew* is not better than "There's small choice in rotten apples."

Some critics are able to forget these things. I am not.

This is to be the Old Vic's critical season. Ralph Richardson and Laurence Olivier have put the Old Vic on a pinnacle; and pinnacles, like bayonets, are hard things to sit on. Neither of these great men is in this year's company. Whether the newcomers—Trevor Howard, Patricia Burke and Celia Johnson—together with Alec Guinness, can replace them in the affections of the Old Vic audience, is a question to which the answer is most eagerly awaited.

One complicating factor is that the Old Vic audience, which



used to be the most intelligent in London, is probably now the least. It replaces knowledge and judgment with sex and hysteria. It has enthusiasm; but the enthusiasm is for getting autographs and rubbing shoulders with film stars. During the intervals hordes of gallery girls rushed down into the stalls. Most of them were very young—fifteen or sixteen. Fat girls, thin girls, pretty girls, and girls not so pretty. Many of them were intent on capturing Richardson's autograph. He and Lady Richardson were in the seats next to me. The girls pushed and shoved, but were quite polite. "You don't mind, do you?" they said, with winning smiles, as they stamped on my toes.

Sir Laurence himself was further along the row, a conspicuous object with his dark hair dyed a brilliant yellow for his film *Hamlet*. Every time he shuffled in his seat, the excitement was terrific. I suppose nothing like this Old Vic atmosphere has been known in London since the 1920's, when the gallery used to yell at the undressing Miss Bankhead, "Tallulah, you're wonderful."

In the *Monitor*, of *Anna Lucasta* and its company, I say that black Americans have softer voices than their white countrymen. They certainly seem to have very gentle manners. To-day I receive from Frederick O'Neal, who plays the bullying brother-in-law magnificently, this pleasant note: "Thank you so much for your very nice review of our show, *Anna Lucasta*."

"We have all read it with great interest and shall endeavour during our stay here to justify the very gracious reception that we have had here in London." I suspect a similar note has been sent to every critic in London.

5, WEDNESDAY. Another letter about *Anna Lucasta*, this time from Cambridge. B. E. King, of Pembroke College, tells me he was "immediately struck," when he saw it in New York, by a fact that I mention, namely, that there is nothing in it distinctive of negro thought and culture. The explanation, it seems, is that the play was originally written about Poles. Mr. King believes that in the original production in Harlem it was actually acted as a play about Poles, and only changed when it was transferred to Broadway. He adds that "the truth is that there is no economic motive or reward in the U.S.A.

for producing true negro plays—though there are striking exceptions by white authors who have already achieved fame by plays about their own people. There are a few genuine plays about life in Harlem—chiefly, I believe, satires on the intellectuals, or at least professional classes, of Harlem, who would desert their own origin and ape the rich Americans. But these are not box-office propositions, and are only played at the heroic little Negro Theatre in Harlem.”

They might not be box-office propositions in large theatres with an expensive cast—years ago Mr. Cochran found that even so fine a negro play as *Porgy* made no fortunes—but might they not form sufficiently attractive a novelty to pay their way at one of the small private houses? I cannot imagine they would prove less attractive at the New Lindsey, say, than *This Virtue*. Theatre clubs really justify their existence by producing plays that would not get a hearing in the commercial theatre. Too often such plays are things that even a club audience doesn't want to hear. But one of these negro pieces might easily achieve notoriety. It would be a fluke, of course; but it was by a fluke that Columbus discovered America.

6, THURSDAY. To-day brings Oxford's contribution to *Anna Lucasta*, full of fine indignation. The company may feel that I praised them sufficiently. Oxford, more royalist than the king, does not. Mr. Eric Dineen, a member of New College, writes, “Reading through the articles of our eminent theatre critics . . . I was ashamed, annoyed, and, with you, sir, disappointed. . . . To suggest that the hysteria of the first-night London audience was influenced by the colour of the cast . . . is an insult to the actors and actresses, and also to all audiences. I would point out, sir, that the Oxford audiences, including a large number of undergraduates, concurred with the London audience in expressing approval of this play. I shall not rant, but request that you visit this play again one evening, not in your professional capacity, but as a human being capable of enjoying himself. To sugar the pill, please accept this copy of *Viewpoint*, with my best wishes.”

Enclosed is a new Oxford magazine which the editor says is “precocious” in the success it has gained, whatever that

may mean. This lively and engaging letter shows that Oxford, in a too rapidly changing world, remains unaltered. Yesterday I happened to read in Macaulay that just before the revolution of 1688, "plays which had been enthusiastically applauded in London were not thought out of danger till they had undergone the more severe judgment of audiences familiar with Sophocles and Terence." Having undergone that severe judgment to-day, presumably no London criticism is needed.

All the same, this letter surprises me. I thought I had praised *Anna Lucasta*; I am certain that my colleagues did so. It is a long time since a play in London had so warm a critical welcome. When Sir John Eliot sent to Charles I an apology for something or other, the king remarked briefly, "Not humble enough." I am not fulsome enough.

13, THURSDAY. Frederick O'Neal gives me this account of the origin of *Anna Lucasta*. "The play had been passed around to various Broadway producers for quite some time. The agent for the play sent it to us, that is, the American Negro Theatre. We read it at the time, and thought that it was a very good play. However, it was about a Polish family, so we put it aside for three years, and in 1944 we again dug it out of our files and decided to re-adapt it.

"With this in mind, we approached Harry Wagstaffe Gribble (who, by the way, was born in England near Kent, and came to America as stage manager for Mrs. Patrick Campbell). Mr. Gribble re-wrote the play, so that there is hardly any resemblance to *Anna Lukaska* [*sic*].

"After seven weeks' rehearsal, we opened in the basement of the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library. We ran the play for five weeks of the scheduled six, and were forced to close due to warm weather. During that time a number of producers were angling for the rights of the play. Mr. John Wildeberg came out the winner, and I believe the rest of the story is generally known."

In London, as in the long New York run, *Anna Lucasta* has a happy ending. After her marriage Anna is frightened back into her old life as a dockside prostitute, but she is rescued by her husband. "I might add," says Mr. O'Neal, "that we

played this piece as a tragedy during its run in Harlem. In my opinion it should have remained a tragedy, but it was produced during the war and I believe it was generally felt by the producers that with all the tragedy in the lives of the people, it would not be wise to produce it with the tragic ending."

16, SUNDAY. Letter in to-day's *Sunday Times*.

In his article on *The Taming of the Shrew*, Mr. Hobson makes some unfavourable comments on the play's philosophy, citing as its "best" line, "There's small choice in rotten apples." It seems in this respect unfair to exclude the lines embodying the philosophy of the bemused Sly whose presence in the Old Vic production is so important. I refer to the closing lines of the Induction:

"Come, madam wife, sit by my side, and let the world slip:  
we shall ne'er be younger."

These words, despite their prose form, have a content and cadence truly poetic.

*Oxford*

ALAN WILKINSON

There is something to be said for Mr. Wilkinson's quotation. It has a philosophy—eat, drink, and be merry: gather ye rosebuds—that, to some temperaments, is as serviceable as another; and its sense of the fleetingness of youth, and of the shortness of life, and jollity, and sunshine has a touch, though light as a butterfly's wing, of poetry. But the brevity of youth has many times been elsewhere expressed, and more poignantly: not least by Shakespeare himself—"What is love? 'Tis not hereafter; Present mirth hath present laughter."

Moreover, I was discussing the philosophy of *The Taming of the Shrew* as a whole, not an isolated and casual phrase. That philosophy is the subjection of woman; and it is a brutal philosophy. Sly's words no more make the philosophy of the play than five minutes' moralizing at the end of five acts of Restoration ribaldry constitute Wycherley a Sunday-school teacher.

10, MONDAY. *Ruth Draper* in a series of matinées at the Criterion Theatre. Imagine that Kipling had prefaced the best of his stories with an announcement that he would introduce

into it the most moving quotation in modern literature. Would then that closing passage in which the unmarried mother leaves the war grave of her son in the care of someone she supposed to be the gardener have its present tremendous effect?

Of course not. Tell a man that you are going to knock him down and you put him on his guard. Warn an audience that it has tears it must be prepared to shed, and immediately its eyes become as dry as a 1947 summer.

Mark, then, the triumph of Miss Ruth Draper. She introduces her sketch of an old, frail, black-shawled Irishwoman in County Kerry in 1919 with the remark that the incident it shows is absolutely authentic. This is as bad a beginning as ever Walter Scott himself devised. Whenever an author describes an event that is palpably and obviously unconvincing he is sure to tell you that it actually occurred. In fiction, fact is nearly always at odds with truth. Having opened her mouth and put her foot in it, Miss Draper then proceeds to ram it down her throat by observing that this old woman used a phrase of such astonishing and remarkable beauty that she had felt compelled to embody it in the ensuing sketch. At this I writhed in my seat. Nothing but a craven fear that the management would complain if I left almost before the performance had started prevented my rushing into the street.

And what was the result? Miss Draper told a simple enough tale of a shrunk and wrinkled mother who saw a vision of a soldier son covered with wounds that would never heal but bidding her not to grieve. She told it with such heart-rending pauses, with so exquisitely musical a voice, with so fine a distinction between the turbulent and wild sorrow that is a present experience, and the past sorrow that has become permanently builded into life's fabric, serene and lovely, that I was entranced, enchanted, most deeply moved. Kipling couldn't do it. Miss Draper could, and did.

And the best of it all is that I'm not sure even now what phrase it was that so struck Miss Draper's imagination.

With the rest of her performance I was less taken. I admired, but I also questioned. Is it possible that Miss Draper is too clever? She has a fine gift for entering into the skins of other people, but it is a gift that can be abused. In the programme

that I saw she was the old Irishwoman, a Scottish girl, an English hostess, and a French actress, all of them wonders of impersonation. But the artist understands best the people of his own hearthstone. Miss Draper's hearthstone is American, and it was in evidence for only one-third of this afternoon. Rob Roy was no fool when he exclaimed, "My foot is on my native heath, and my name is MacGregor."

11, TUESDAY. *The Little Dry Thorn*, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. Gordon Daviot has made of the story of Abraham, Sara and Hagar a worthy little play. She lets Mr. Richard Ainley make a splendid façade of Abraham, without altogether concealing the less impressive material within. She has the skilful assistance of Miss Angela Baddeley in representing Sara as more angelic, and of Miss Patricia Kneale in revealing Hagar as more minxish, than either of them really was. Miss Alison Leggatt, as Lot's wife, makes curiosity a very laughable virtue. A not unrewarding evening, but I would rather read the Bible at home than take the tube to Hammersmith.

13, THURSDAY. *Outrageous Fortune*, at the Winter Garden Theatre. London has long been grateful for the comic genius of Mr. Ralph Lynn and Mr. Robertson Hare. But it struck me to-night that perhaps their eminence as philosophers has been underestimated. They are side-splitting symbols of the predestinate folly of the human race, and of its scarcely less disastrous optimism.

Crazily confident of the sufficiency of their intellectual resources, Mr. Lynn and Mr. Hare, like the human race itself, blunder perseveringly from one situation with which they are unable to cope into another. Failing at everything to which they put their hands, stumbling into pitfalls, tumbling into gins, they continue to invent their vetoes, and their atom bombs, which in this particular case take the form of trying to double-cross both a gang of criminals and the police. Interrogated in a police-cell, Mr. Hare is especially superb. Caught red-handed with forged ration books thick about him, attempting to shove a rifle through a policeman's ribs, Mr. Hare never-

theless booms with Agamemnon-like indignation, thundering those harmless but resounding expletives which Mr. Ben Travers invents for him with such facility.

I have never seen Mr. Lynn in better form. He faces pretty girls and irascible grandfathers, handcuffs and secret passages, with the same glittering and toothy smile, the same dropping monocle, the same exuberant kick of the heel, the same absurd optimism, sowing everywhere his discreet indiscretions, always withdrawing in total, but happily only momentary, disorder. In every incident, Mr. Lynn and Mr. Hare are utterly routed. But, by some miracle of mathematics, these defeats add up to make the evening a complete and hilarious victory.

17, MONDAY. The Old Vic *Richard II*, at the New Theatre. The merits of Mr. Alec Guinness's *Richard II*, marked with the pale cast of thought, have, I think, been insufficiently recognized.

Not that I find it faultless. This *Richard* is a prince who cannot royster. If Mr. Guinness's young king has heard the chimes at midnight, it is through the study window, and not over alehouse tipples. This actor, moreover, is no taller than Garrick was; and when Bolingbroke, for example, before Flint Castle speaks of the splendour of his physical presence, Mr. Guinness, instead of blushing like the discontented sun, reminds one rather of a sulky child. And in the early scenes he speaks his loveliest lines with a detached air, a faraway smile, as if he were listening to some secret music beyond the hearing of any ears but his own. Though this has a wistful and touching effect, one wonders now and again whether he will ever succeed in making the music audible to the audience.

But the main charge against him has been that he does not follow Montague. Ever since that great writer argued that *Richard* is a self-conscious artist revelling in misfortune, all Richards who have not bathed themselves in luxurious woe with obvious sensuous pleasure have caught the rough end of the critical stick. This is not just. I grant the exquisite beauty of *Richard*'s reception of defeat and sorrow, his embracing of the sweet way to despair. But the current view is not thus contented. It would have *Richard* not only greet dishonour

and deposition with words of sad and swelling poetry; but greet them so exclusively. It would have him solely the beautiful and decadent artist moved by his own sorrows to a sobbing ecstasy of self-indulgent grief.

Now, that Richard is sensitive to grief cannot be denied; but he is sensitive to other emotions as well. His imagination quickens at the thought of worms and epitaphs; but not more than at the notion of the grandeur and the divinity of kings. He can gloom and weep; but he can also boast and triumph. Richard in fact is not a Mrs. Gummidge exalted and transfigured, proud only in mourning and solely happy in misery. He is rather a poet whom every theme inspires.

It is thus that Mr. Guinness plays him. The note is first struck in the banishment of Norfolk. It is with conscious pleasure that Richard dwells upon the "sly slow hours" and "the dateless limit of thy dear exile." But when Norfolk sadly complains, Richard's tone changes to summary condemnation. Richard is, in fact, making a poem out of the idea of perpetual banishment. Of Norfolk as a person he simply does not think at all.

So, throughout the play, he deals with any idea that is put up to him. Toss him a notion, and he will immediately produce for it a ravishing melody. There used to be a variety artist who would compose impromptu a poem on any subject his audience suggested. That man's shoes should have been on this Richard's feet.

The relevance of this? I suggest that there is a vital difference between the grief-intoxicated man who unburdens his heart in great verse, and the poet who can make great verse out of any topic that comes along. I should expect far less abandonment in the second than in the first. I am not troubled, therefore, because Mr. Guinness's Richard has leisure to think as well as feel. I believe Shakespeare himself intended it so.

The feeling and the thinking are touched to fine issues. I have never ~~heard~~ the great speeches more beautifully delivered. In the scenes in Wales in particular that music which at first only Mr. Guinness hears surges through the theatre. He has a whole orchestra in his voice: the wailing violin, the thunder-



ing trumpet, the lamenting 'cello. Mr. Guinness's is one of the three best performances in London.

The Old Vic Company is admirable. Mr. Harry Andrews as Bolingbroke is full of gusto, and Mr. George Relph's York has a touching loyalty till the character breaks in two.

Perhaps this was not a real first night, since the Old Vic did the play at the New Theatre earlier in the year. At any rate, there were several seats empty, and the usual frenzied autograph hunters did not seem to be present either in large numbers or ferocious mood. I left the theatre at the end with toes untrodden.

When the play finished, there was great enthusiasm, but no hysteria. Alec Guinness, who has been filming during the summer, in his curtain speech gracefully observed, "For the last three months I have been working in what is known as the Industry; but [here he waved to the line of players standing behind him], I can't tell you how glad I am to be back with the Profession."

19, WEDNESDAY. *Honour and Obey*, at the Saville Theatre. Mr. Naunton Wayne has dwindled into a husband in Guildford. He mentions Lord's only once, but he can still, with a not fully conscious air, flick the ball to the boundary faster than most players can drive it. There is an admirable scene of bickering between Mr. Wayne and the agreeable Miss Nora Swinburne; and a disgruntled discussion of wives between Mr. Wayne and Mr. Hugh Dempster is briefer and even better. For the rest, Miss Swinburne is made tipsy for no reason whatever, and Miss Ursula Howells, as a fractious fiancée, is induced to give a really shocking display of bad manners to a harmless girl whose sole crime is to mistake clichés for profundities. Mr. Denis Gordon, as a quarrelsome lover, is dynamic; but he confuses a storm in a teacup with an earthquake. The play is by an author named Wilde, but most people will consider it inferior to *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

25, TUESDAY. *Private Enterprise*, at the St. James's Theatre. Someone really ought to explain to Mr. St. John Ervine the difference between a play and a political speech. That differ-

ence is not the difference between a work of art and claptrap. Burke writing political speeches is a good deal better worth reading than any living dramatist whose plays I have seen this year. If Mr. Somerset Maugham, Mr. Noel Coward or Mr. Emlyn Williams produces a phrase that lives longer than "Magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom, and a great empire and little minds go ill together," then three eminent men will doubtless be agreeably surprised.

Very well, then: a political speech needn't be claptrap. But its appeal to men is in general partial. It is to the Liberal, the Socialist, or the Conservative in them. But the appeal of a good play is not partial. It is to the whole human being, undifferentiated by politics, religion, or education. A theatre is a place where Conservatives and Socialists, Roman Catholics and Latter Day Saints, stamp collectors and bimetallicists come together by virtue of their common humanity.

Mr. St. John Ervine begins by remembering this. In its first act, *Private Enterprise* is undoubtedly a play. The upper middle-class, factory-owning inhabitants of Edmund Delaware's very comfortable home in the Midlands are real people. We may not be able to afford the clothes their women wear, but we can sympathize with their aspirations. The scapegrace son who has won the V.C.: the Pacifist who is at once passionate and intelligent: the elder son who runs the factory with stubborn integrity: his wife who, with much beauty, has more brains than you might guess: even the inconsequential rattle (Flora Finching in youth) whom the scallywag is to marry for her money: and the father who sets the play's opening theme, are characters full of promise.

The English gentry used to dress for dinner; but the aristocrats of the French Revolution did even better. They dressed for death, going to the guillotine with clean cravats and freshly powdered hair. For the spirit of that style, of that grace, Mr. Nicholas Hannen makes old Mr. Delaware devotedly yearn; and there is no reason why any of us should not join in his desire for the return of beauty and joy to a world starved of both.

Mr. Ervine is not afraid of putting his thoughts and feelings into ringing and eloquent words. He does not believe that stage speeches should never be more than two lines long, nor

consist principally of jerks, squeaks, clearings of the throat, and dashes. His people unpack their hearts with words, and all sorts of valuable and entertaining things tumble out. Mr. Hector Ross, as the Pacifist, speaks with an especial force and sincerity, and throughout the evening is a source of pleasure.

In the second act the play switches to the subject of industrial strife. There is a strike in the Delaware factory over a closed-shop dispute. From this point onwards the politician in Mr. Ervine takes over from the dramatist. Mr. Shaw says that the playwright should remember that every one of his characters has in him something of the Holy Ghost. Mr. Ervine, however, remembers only Dr. Johnson's determination not to let the Whig dogs have the best of it. His craftsmanship and his vigour continue to the end. The interest does not flag. The thumping speeches thump on. They happen to say many things with which I agree. But this enables me to insist the more freely that they are the speeches of a politician, not a playwright. "Magnanimity in politics is not seldom the truest wisdom" is a maxim even dramatists might remember.

Mr. Maugham, Mr. Coward and Mr. Williams might think dramatic critics should remember it too.

26, WEDNESDAY. *The Patched Cloak*, at the Boltons Theatre. Consider worms. You can chop a worm (not that I advise you to) into pieces, and it carries on apparently unconcerned. The same thing can be done to Miss Joan Temple's play about Henry VII, selections from which were presented at the Boltons to-night. Three scenes were omitted out of the eleven on the programme. It is less puzzling why these three scenes weren't played than why the other eight were. Henry champion of the middle classes, Henry the merciful victor, Henry the miser were discussed in detached scenes any one of which could have been dropped without impairing the organic life the play hadn't got. It reminded me of Marten and Warner, Little Arthur intervening. However, I congratulate Miss Isabel Dean as Elizabeth of York, and Mr. John Wyse as Henry on staying a gruelling course: and myself, too, for the same reason.

28, FRIDAY. *The Moon in the Yellow River*, at the Arts Theatre.

## THEATRE

As might have been expected, this revival of Mr. Denis Johnston's is the play of the week. Set in the Irish troubles, it is as hard to grasp as a rainbow, as crazily inconsequential as Ben Travers, as sentimental as Barrie, as eloquent as O'Casey. It has Roman learning, Celtic imagination, Russian melancholy, bombs that don't explode, the bitterness of disillusion, the poetry of faith, revolutions planned by excited and exalted children, political murder and domestic reconciliation. Does this list bewilder? So does the play. But it will touch and amuse. Miss Betty Chancellor and Mr. Jack Hawkins beautifully act the final scene, in which the embittered widower, still mourning his wife's death in childbirth, at last opens the door of his heart to the young daughter against whom he has shut it so long. There is some roughness in the production: when they are not speaking, characters stand statuesque as Tussaud's; but the light of a first-class mind shines through.

# DECEMBER 1947

2, TUESDAY. *The Blind Goddess*, at the Apollo Theatre. This is an agreeable enough tissue of nonsense by Sir Patrick Hastings about a libel action, an eminent K.C., a virtuous secretary, a wicked peer, and a heroine who is sent, not to Coventry, but to Colombo, for the greater part of the play.

If the rest of the characters had gone with her, I can't say I should have been inconsolable. Yet it would have been a pity to miss Mr. Basil Radford showing his junior in court how to let the little chances slip by, provided you leap on the big one; and Mr. Wyndham Goldie's dishonest lord is a striking figure. If this man swindles, why, he swindles with distinction. There are several epigrams in the play, but they all have a matt finish.

3, WEDNESDAY. *Saint Joan*, at the New Theatre. The spirituality of Joan is at the heart of Mr. Shaw's fine play. As it is manifested in Miss Celia Johnson's performance for the Old Vic, it has a highly distinctive quality. It is the quality of effortlessness, of clearness, of serenity.

Jacob in the wilderness wrestled with the angel of God. Luther was tempted, and hurled his inkpot at the Devil. "Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief" is a cry that has risen from the lips of many men who have lifted their eyes to the Grail, but have not been able to grasp it. In these things are to be found the hungering and thirsting after righteousness which is one of the ways of salvation.

But it is not the only way, nor the best. You do not hunger and thirst after what you have got. You do not, if I may use a homely metaphor in keeping with much of the phraseology of *Saint Joan*, run after a bus when you have already caught it.

That note of struggle so insistent in Luther and Jacob is inappropriate in one whose faith has been serene from the outset.

Such is the faith of Miss Johnson's Joan. This Joan's fighting is as temporal as it is temporary. It has known no spiritual ambushes, no mental snare. It fights against principalities, and against powers, but not against spiritual wickedness, for spiritual wickedness is something it cannot even realize.

The faith of this Joan, who is wide-eyed in wonder, in appearance slender and gentle and yielding as the willow, soft-voiced as a summer breeze, angelic as a choir of surpliced children, has never had to know increase. It came to her from the beginning, like God, not as in the dawning of the day, not as in the bud of the spring, but as the sun at noon and as the sheaves in harvest. This Joan does not run for the bus. She has never run for the bus. She has been on it all the time. Miss Johnson's is a performance of clear spiritual perception.

Is everything, then, to be praise? Hardly. Joan's spirituality is clear. Is it also strong? This is where one doubts. I have compared it to the sun at noonday, and the comparison is deserved. But it is a spring sun, and not a summer. Its clarity is greater than its power, its beauty more notable than its authority. Its radiance illuminates Joan's face, but whether it would have driven the English out of France is another matter.

Nevertheless, Miss Johnson's is a fine performance. It is matched by others in a production that is admirable except for a bushel of false emphases in the first scene, and a general drabness of scenery. Mr. Alec Guinness's Dauphin is a triumph. It suggests a sharp-nosed, half-witted schoolgirl in its red stockings, and its yellow smock, and it replies to all the bullying it encounters with a flouncing and sulky resentment that is endearing as well as comic.

When Dunois and La Hire and the Archbishop, in the cathedral scene, abandon Joan, it is only what one expects, and one does not even blame them; but when the Dauphin does so, one is a little disappointed. In spite of his cowardice and his foolishness, one thought one had perceived the glimmer of better things. Another excellent performance is Mr. Bernard Miles's Inquisitor, whose long speech is delivered with a calm and insinuating eloquence. And in the voice of Mr. Peter

Copley's Brother Martin, who defends Joan at the trial, there is a stirring and a passionate anguish.

I wish I had space to praise not only the skill and suppleness of Mr. Shaw's mind in this play, but also its generosity. I have never thought that Mr. Shaw, except in one or two pieces like *Candida*, has much capacity for character-drawing. It is ideas that are his strength. If he cannot get into the body of men and women, he is certainly at home in a body of thought. If only younger dramatists would bring his temper to a drama of controversy, they would do far finer work: this is the thing done masterly. To the last letter, Mr. Shaw obeys the best advice, which is Acton's: Do what you can for the other side. Mr. Shaw believes in Joan; but he knows, not only that her enemies may have been good men, but that their ideas were not necessarily either foolish or wicked. One leaves the theatre in a mood of reconciliation, which is better than that of indignation, however righteous.

4, THURSDAY. *John Bull's Other Island*, at the Embassy Theatre. One is glad to welcome the Dublin Gate Theatre company back to London. They put a splendid swing and bustle into Mr. Shaw's discursive discussion play. Especially did I like the spirit, resource, good humour and resilience of Mr. Hilton Edwards's brass-witted, tin-tongued, golden-fisted wandering Englishman in search of a Parliamentary seat. Next week the company will present Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says No*, thus passing from a modern master to what many good judges consider a modern masterpiece.

8, MONDAY. *Mistinguett*, at the Casino Theatre. The legend of Mistinguett's youth is only—a legend. She made her first appearance on the stage in Paris in 1899; for more than a generation people have spoken of her age as being, like that of the Nibelungs, fabulous. She is older, says Pater of the Mona Lisa, than the rocks among which she sits. Mistinguett is older than the jokes of some of our most venerable comedians. And always people speak of her astonishing youthfulness, of those marvellous legs, once worth a hundred thousand pounds. The legs are still there, svelte and shapely; but the youth is

something that must have vanished so long ago no one can remember it, not even Mistinguett. When she raised her long blue dress to the waist, and the dazzling limbs were revealed, the audience clapped and cheered as if at the unveiling of a public monument. But the face above them was worn and lined and infinitely sad.

At 7.52 p.m. a troupe of dancing girls, in white skirts edged with black, came on. They pranced about the stage for sixty seconds, and then the band struck up a few bars of the *Marseillaise*. An announcer in evening dress, confident and eupeptic, arrived, and at 7.54 Mistinguett herself. She wore a long white dress reaching to the ground, and sang a little song in a voice no bigger than the squeak of a mouse. With her dancing partner, Lino Carenzio, she danced a few steps, Carenzio, himself full of lightness and speed and gaiety, holding her as if she were a fragile piece of china that might break at any moment.

And break in fact, she did. For, at 8.15 p.m., at the end of the second line of one of her most celebrated songs—a song she must have sung thousands of times—"Mon Homme," she stopped, put her hands before her face, and cried. "You do not understand me," she whimpered, "I can't go on, I can't." Carenzio rushed out from the wings, put his arms round her, and led her away. Even so it was as much as she could do to get off the stage without falling. There was a good deal of toing and froing, the curtain came down, the manager came on, Carenzio said Mistinguett was suffering from first-night nerves, she had been rehearsing all day, she was very tired, but, if the audience would give her a moment to recover, she would go on.

The audience behaved very well, it applauded sympathetically, and Mistinguett returned, but at the same point she broke down again. In a weak and broken voice she kept on insisting between her tears, "You do not understand me," and it is possible she felt that her act was not going very well among foreigners not acquainted with the language she was singing in. Again the curtain was lowered, but it rose once more, and in a manner that was feebleness and weakness incarnate, Mistinguett finished her ~~act~~ <sup>song</sup>, sustained to the end by Carenzio, who behaved with tact, *élan*, and kindness throughout.



9, TUESDAY. *The Old Lady Says No*, by Denis Johnston, at the Embassy Theatre. This bitter lament that romantic dreams fade into the light of common day, that Ireland in chains is freer than Ireland liberated, because freedom is then still an ideal and not yet a fraud, is a field-day for Mr. Micheál Mac-Liammóir. In the wild phantasmagoria of Mr. Denis Johnston's play, nothing comes amiss to him—humour, despair, rhetoric, passion—he takes them all in his stride. A remarkable performance in a remarkable entertainment, if that is the right word for it; or political cantata, if you prefer it; or dramatic and historic conundrum; or as you like it, or what you will.

After the performance, Elizabeth, Kay Kleinfeldt, Cyril Ray and I went to a party given by Daniel Wherry. We made a bad miscalculation over this. Feeling hungry, we stopped on the way at a Hampstead café to eat some cheese sandwiches which were mostly tomato and weren't sandwiches at all. Arriving with appetites blunted, we found an astounding array of foods, besides lashings of drinks, in which I take no interest. Trifles, cakes, mincepies, sandwiches, fruits, and chocolates decorated every outpost of furniture, every bastion of bed and board. In spite of the cheese I found I could still eat chocolate. Kay said, "I think it's disgusting to eat other people's chocolate rations, don't you?" I couldn't have agreed more, but fortunately I never let my actions be influenced by merely intellectual convictions, and I enjoyed the chocolates very much. Wherry is an excellent host. He moved about his rooms indefatigably, introducing everybody to everybody.

Norman Marshall, who has just left the Arts because he disagrees with its policy of revivals, said he could not accept the argument in my review of *Private Enterprise* that a play should be agreeable to Tories and Socialists, Roman Catholics and Plymouth Brethren. He took this to mean that I rule out controversial subjects from the drama, and confine it to matters of emotion. But surely this does not follow. I meant, not that there shouldn't be controversy on the stage, but that the controversy should be real controversy, with each side given a chance to put its case to the best of its ability. "A Doll's House didn't unite people," said Marshall. "It split families

from top to bottom." Well, even *A Doll's House* would be a better play if it made Helmer a character instead of a caricature.

Michéal MacLiammóir outlined a theory that what makes the type of play is the setting. "Put half a dozen people round a table in a brightly lit room, with nothing to do but talk, and it'll work out like Shaw. Put them in a garden, with autumn leaves falling, and a guitar in the distance, and it'll be Chekov."

10, WEDNESDAY. Some people on Monday seem to have doubted whether Mistinguett's breakdown was genuine, or a trick to win the audience's sympathy. There can be no doubt that it was the real thing. Lunched to-day with C. B. Cochran, who saw the second-house performance on Monday. Mistinguett went through this performance without mishap. What happened at the first house was, as I suspected, the bitter disappointment of an artist who had for thirty or forty years been looking forward to appearing in London, and who then found, when she did appear, that the audience understood nothing of her jokes or her meaning. The audience was kindly, but it was about as animated as a lump of wood. She could establish no communication with it, and the realization overcame her. C.B., who has known Mistinguett for nearly fifty years, learned this from her in her dressing-room after the show.

16, TUESDAY. *Where Stars Walk*, at the Embassy Theatre. The Dublin Gate Theatre Company has saved up its best scenery, but not its best play, for its last week in London. The tapestries, carpets, and marble columns of the rich Dublin mansion which grace Micheál MacLiammóir's story of a servant girl and a wandering mystic who are an Irish princess of long ago and her lover reincarnated are in striking contrast with the slabs of painted canvas that chiefly served for *John Bull's Other Island* and *The Old Lady Says No*. But these were real plays: the one an astringent political satire, the other a confused but stimulating attack on Englishmen's massed ignorance of Ireland and Irish history; while *Where Stars Walk* is only a taradiddle (though an amiable one) about fairies, in which the most amusing scenes and characters, like the patronizing Englishman and the retired actress, are irrelevant. With

an audience of Tinker Bells, it would be a riot. With an audience of Hobsons, a rout.

17, WEDNESDAY. *The Relapse*, at the Lyric, Hammersmith. Vanbrugh's play—especially in this revival—has the enormous virtue of zest. *The Relapse, or Virtue in Danger*, does not toy with indecency. It plunges head foremost into an unsavoury sea, delightedly choking itself with mud. Miss Jessie Evans's country lass doesn't tremble on the brink of sex; she embraces it like a child hugging a teddy bear. Miss Wynne Clark's Nurse reminds one of Hogarth; lubricity leaps from her eye, yet she looks like the Duchess in *Alice*. In fact, Vanbrugh's love of filthiness here seems remarkably healthy; his passion is clean, even if the object of it isn't.

Vanbrugh shows the country gentleman in his midden as well as the fop in his finery, Miss Hoyden searching for bed as well as Young Fashion impecuniously interested in board; and Mr. Anthony Quayle's production gives a roaring life to the rural scenes. The plot is nothing: the rich Foppington and his brother both try to marry money, and one of them attempts the seduction of the virtuous heroine. But the city scenes are as good as the provincial; these periwig-pated, paradox-prating gentlemen, these lily-like, lecherous ladies, with their oaths of style and their indecencies of grace, are diverting company: and Mr. Cyril Ritchard's Lord Foppington is a gorgeous creation of wit, wigs, taste and paste.

Viscount and Viscountess Kemsley to-day gave a luncheon at Chandos House in honour of Sir Osbert Sitwell, to whom the first award of the *Sunday Times* prize for literature has been made. This prize, which carries with it a gold medal and a thousand pounds, is the most valuable in the world given for a single book, and Sir Osbert has won it with the second volume of his masterly autobiography, *The Scarlet Tree*.

The entire ceremony was beautifully arranged, a model of what such things should be, but seldom are. All the speeches were excellent. After Mr. Hadley, Editor of the *Sunday Times*, had briefly outlined the nature and scope of the prize, Lord Kemsley presented it, in a most graceful address, to Sir Osbert, who declared that the occasion was one that gratified what had

been his dominant passions since childhood, namely, vanity and avarice.

18, THURSDAY. *Macbeth*, at the Aldwych Theatre. This is the only production of *Macbeth* I have seen in which the knocking on the gate produces an effect big enough to justify all the fuss De Quincey made about it. The reason I leapt in my seat as the knocking broke in on the monstrous fact of murder explains both the strength and the weakness of the latest presentation of the shortest, most energetic, concentrated and vehement of Shakespeare's tragedies.

The effect was not due to a sudden relief of tension. Before you can slacken a wire it must first be taut; and all the time that Miss Ena Burrill and Mr. Michael Redgrave had been discounting failure, apostrophizing sleep, and generally working themselves up into no end of a state, the wire had been sagging dangerously. No, the effect was due to the old trick of the conjurer who, when he is about to produce rabbits from his coat-tails, tells you to watch carefully his left eyebrow.

I was fascinated by the elaborate preparations Miss Burrill made when, after Duncan was dead, she bade Macbeth give her the bloodstained daggers. She rolled up her long sleeves half-way to the elbow. She moved as if to take one in each hand. Then she realized that to do so would double the risk of polluting herself with blood: so the hand that had by now seized the first dagger was made to hold the second also. As she stole away, sinuous and gliding, to the royal chamber, the entire audience was preoccupied with her evident determination to allow no drop of blood to soil her garments. The outer world, the slaughtered Duncan, Macbeth himself, were forgotten: one fact only stood out in the universe: Lady Macbeth must not spatter herself with blood. This was the method of the producer, Mr. Norris Houghton, to make us concentrate on the conjurer's left eyebrow. Then, on our distracted attention, broke the knocking on the gate, like something from another existence. This was the rabbit out of the coat-tails. As I say, I leapt in my seat. And Mr. Reginald Beckwith, the distinguished author of *Boys in Brown*, not far away, kept pace with me, jump for jump.

In all that might be called the conjuring, that is, the extraneous, aspect, this production is very good. The three witches sing. Before the murder there is a further song, "Bellona's Bridegroom." Lady Macbeth is presented almost as a vamp; when she greets Duncan, her body sways and ripples; and she delivers a good part of her opening speech lying flat on the ground. The scenic effects—the mists, the angry skies, the cruel winding firths, the dizzy battlements—are admirable. Macbeth doth murder sleep; this *Macbeth* will keep the most somnolent awake.

But the essential thing about *Macbeth*, oddly enough, is Macbeth. Now Mr. Redgrave has a fine presence and a keen intelligence, but from time to time he reminds me of Iceland, the place where the depressions come from. Macbeth, of course, is constantly on the rack; but Mr. Redgrave too often seems merely in the dumps. Macbeth fights, he rages, he laments, he rejoices, his spirit is never broken. Mr. Redgrave boldly combats his natural gloom, and in the end, I think, defeats the Mrs. Gummidge part of him. His performance, like the production, at last becomes energetic, concentrated, and vehement. But his start is slow; he looks as wild as the Great Glen of Mull; and in the strain after speed and barbarian vigour, the poetry, alas, is lost.

24, WEDNESDAY. *Babes in the Wood*, at the Princes Theatre. *Babes in the Wood*, along with some of the other Christmas shows I've seen in the last few days, rushing from a quarter of an hour in one theatre to ten minutes in the next, reminds me somewhat of *Macbeth*. The stories both of *Macbeth* and the *Babes* are full of dire threats against the innocent. Macbeth himself commits murder. And "Monsewer" Eddie Gray, the wicked uncle of the pantomime, if he doesn't screw himself up to murder, deliberately looks like a murderer. His pasty cheeks, red nose, and hanging black moustache are surely those of Neil Cream!

In spite of all this, *Babes in the Wood* isn't a frightening show. Mr. Gray, whatever his appearance may recall to the sophisticated, is a comedian, and at any minute he passes from clever juggling to French of a rather lower order of accomplishment.

At the Princes there are dancing dwarfs, and mountains of moving toy scenery, and cheerful songs, and a miniature circus, and a flying ballet, and a comic horse; and when for a moment a little attention is given to the rather gloomy tale of the threatened infants, it isn't done at all seriously. Children of the gentlest nerves can enjoy *Babes in the Wood* without suffering. It induces no bad dreams.

A good thing, too. Looking around for some material for my review of *Macbeth*, I came upon that stimulating and little-known eighteenth-century critic, Francis Gentleman. Gentleman, on the whole, thinks *Macbeth* rather vulgar. He commends Lady Macbeth's "invocation to spirits of evil influence" as "worthy of a powerful imagination," but, he continues, "we must offer some doubt whether the word *blanket* of the dark does not convey a low and improper idea." Lady Macbeth's comparison with the poor cat in the adage lacks "good breeding"; and, says Gentleman, "I could heartily wish this passage did not occur:

"There's husbandry in heaven,  
Their candles are all out.

"What a poverty of idea and expression! Yet we find the stars called candles by our author in his *Romeo and Juliet* also—how much more worthy of himself and of his subject, is what Lorenzo calls them in the *Merchant of Venice*, *pattens of bright gold*."

But Gentleman is not merely a destructive critic. He is ready to tell us what Shakespeare ought to have written, as well as what he oughtn't. When Macbeth cried

Bring forth men children only,  
For thy undaunted metal should compose  
Nothing but males,

he suggests this improvement:

Bring forth fierce tygers only,  
For thy relentless nature should compose  
Nothing but beasts.

Throughout his criticism of *Macbeth*, Gentleman shows the worst form of bad taste: which, as might have been expected

from the eighteenth century, is, of course, good taste. In grappling with the play as a whole, Gentleman obviously takes one or two nasty knocks. Nevertheless, his opening observations seem to me to have some sound sense in them: or rather, they would have sense in them if they were applied, not to *Macbeth*, but to pantomimes. This is what Gentleman says:

"Preternatural beings afford the widest, most luxuriant field for genius to sport, and ideas to vegetate in; of this being truly sensible, and willing to give his muse of fire unlimited scope, Shakespeare has in several pieces availed himself, but in none more powerfully than the tragedy now before us; however, though critically we must admire that characteristic peculiarity of sentiment and expression which distinguish the Witches, it is nevertheless necessary to remark, that exhibiting such personages and phantoms, as never had any existence but in credulous or heated imaginations, tends to impress superstitious feelings and fears upon weak minds; for which reason I consider every dramatic piece which treats the audience with a ghost, fairy, or witch, as improper for young, unexperienced spectators in particular; if, as is well known, old women's stories of such, impress a timidity upon every child who hears their terrifying tales, a timidity which lasts to the conclusion of life; may we not infer apprehensions of their having a more forcible effect from being realized on the stage?"

One may be rather superior about Gentleman, and think his nerves were as weak as his judgment. Yet I've never been able to understand why, if you took children to the bawdiest and least suitable Restoration comedies, though they might not be edified, they certainly would see little or nothing to frighten them; while three-quarters of specifically children's entertainments scare them out of their wits. Only last night at the otherwise admirable *Wizard of Oz* at the Strand, an eight- or nine-year-old boy was so upset by the witch scenes that he had to be taken home at the interval. His mother was carrying a parcel in brown paper inscribed with the surname of an actor in the Strand's previous show, *Separate Rooms*. The most timid infant could see *The Relapse* without **batting** anything but a strictly moral eyelid; yet one of the objects of *Treasure Island* and *Peter Pan* is to jelly with the act of fear. The note

of terror is struck far too often in children's entertainments. I have seen even a *Cinderella* with a Demon King. What is the reason for this? Am I unduly sensitive? Or is scaring the life out of children a worthy adult occupation?

I ended the year, however, thinking of musical comedies. Nine or ten months have passed since I appealed to the producers of musical comedy in London to make their shows elegant. Let not these, I said, in a voice no doubt weak and piping, but sincere, let not these be "drab, second-hand, down-at-heel, dilapidated and shop-soiled." Since then two musical shows have been produced in the West End that as little deserve these adjectives as did Keats's name to be writ in water; and a third, *Annie Get Your Gun*, despite inadequacies of presentation, introduced to London a young lady, Miss Dolores Gray, so entrancing in her contradictions, combining the charm of Barrie with the defensive apparatus of a nettle, that complaint is drowned in gratitude. Like the universe of Mr. Bridie's beautifully mouth-filling phrase, Miss Gray is a system of reciprocating opposites, having the complexion of a cold-cream advertisement and the temperament of a bucking broncho; and if the universe oppositely reciprocated with half the attractiveness of Miss Gray it would be a much jollier place to live in.

These three shows, then, *Oklahoma!*, *Bless the Bride*, and *Annie Get Your Gun*, have in one way or another fulfilled my requirements. And what, in terms of Micawber's (and everybody else's) pounds, shillings, and pence, has been the result? The result has been almost record receipts at almost every performance. The result has been paper at the box-office instead of paper in the stalls.

Unfortunately, during the year there have been other musicals whose right to my adjectives no one but their presenters would challenge. I will not recall by name entertainments that everybody is anxious to forget. They wrote bigger figures in redder ink than have been seen in London for a long time. Now these things have a moral; and this moral enables me to greet 1948 with a piece of constructive criticism and business acumen. Here it is: this is a second-rate age, but it will not endure any musical show that is not, in some aspect



or other, first class. First-class music, first-class players, first-class staging. One or other of these is essential.

I know that in respect of the last there are difficulties. At the time of my first article the President of the Society of West End Theatre Managers pointed them out with the courtesy that makes controversy a pleasure. Old scenery has to be vamped up and re-used, and unsuitable materials like ropes, strings and tin-can lids must substitute for better things. But difficulties are there to be overcome. There is no apparent evidence of war-time shabbiness in *Oklahoma!*. But *Oklahoma!* is an American show, and perhaps not strictly relevant.

Very well, then, what about Mr. Cochran's *Bless the Bride*? That is English enough; and if it is tied up with string (as it probably is) no one would guess it. Or consider Mr. Ivor Novello's *Perchance to Dream*. Whatever one may have thought of this, in one's superior way, as a contribution to the Higher Thought, it cannot be denied that it was a superb piece of stage craft, bright and shining in presentation as one of the new pennies promised for these holidays. But Mr. Cochran and Mr. Novello, it may be urged, can call on the services of men of great ability and experience. That gives them a great advantage. Perhaps it does. But they can do it only because they are of great and tried ability themselves.

Then think of the little Players' Theatre, which is now presenting a small revue, called *Players Please*. The Players' Theatre has no advantages. It is tiny, it has an absurd stage, to my Puritan taste its beer-mugs pollute it, the performance goes on to the accompaniment of the roar of the Underground, and I suspect that where money is concerned, it is no Rothschild. Yet scene after scene in its present revue is put on with a compelling evocativeness. The sad, romantic Werther-like luminous darkness of the lament for the Dead Dancers—what is it created by? A wisp of muslin, a lamp—that is all. No, it isn't all. The effect is created by a wisp of muslin, a lamp, and brains; and the greatest of these is brains. The same thing can be said of the background of that song about London River which Mr. Ronnie Hill so sentimentally and so cleverly sings; or that most poignant little scene which shows that many waters cannot quench love, but that the housing shortage can make it

despair. If you really believe that either lack of money or official regulations are an excuse for indifferent work on the musical stage—go to the Players' Theatre.

There are many excellent Christmas entertainments. *Charley's Aunt*, for example, at the Palace, with Cecil Beaton decor; *Treasure Island* (St. James's) and *More Just William* (Palladium) for the robust; *Daddy Long-Legs* (Comedy) for the sentimental, and *Peter Pan* (Scala) with Phyllis Calvert, for both. *The Wizard of Oz* at the Strand is quite delightful, and I enjoyed every minute of it, especially Mr. Richard Dolman's Straw Man. I wouldn't mind being made of straw myself if I could dance as well as Mr. Dolman.

There is magic in the air in other parts of London than Berkeley Square, though I wouldn't like to say about nightingales. Jasper Maskelyne at the Westminster combines in his conjuring a polite Chinese horror with the easy affable air of a man about town, a delicious duality. Dante in *Sim-Sala-Bim*, at the Saville, is ambassadorial in appearance and movement, and caustic in speech, and, with infinite accomplishment, shows that it is easier to saw through a woman than to see through a magician. Indeed, nowhere in the world are you likely to come on the old trap door and evening dress business being better done than by these two accomplished gentlemen. And there is *Cinderella* at the Casino.

31, WEDNESDAY. To Dilys and Leonard Russell's customary magnificent New Year's Eve party, which is now as much an institution as the New Year itself, and far more cheerful than this one is likely to be. At dinner sat next to Michael Redgrave and his charming wife, Rachel Kempson. Introduced myself to Redgrave with the words, "You won't want to know me. I wrote a very uncomplimentary review of your performance in *Macbeth*." To which he replied promptly, "I haven't read it."

This left him with distinctly the upper hand in the conversation, and he got a further advantage when I asked him to sign Margaret's autograph album, which he nobly (all things considered) agreed to do. He drew in it a portrait of me. "I shall make it as spiteful as I can," he said. He entitled it, "Daddy"—and, after glancing at my lemonade and his champagne, added, "in my cups."

## BOUQUETS

*The most richly theatrical, flamboyant, big-scale performance of the year:*

Robert Morley as Arnold Holt in Henry Sherek's presentation of *Edward, My Son*, at His Majesty's and the Lyric.

*The most moving moment of the year:*

Came when Fay Compton, as Candida, in the last act of Shaw's play of that name, was sitting by the fireside, with her husband, the magnificent clergyman Morell, and the poet Eugene Marchbanks, bidding for her love, and she said of Morell (and with how much affection): "When there is money to give, he gives it: when there is money to be refused, I refuse it." Never can a mortal blow have been dealt for better reasons, or more tenderly.

*The most poignant performance of the year:*

Margaret Auld Nelson's, in *Oklahoma!*, as the little girl with yellow pigtails, who never speaks, but who, in all the dances, represents childhood just vanishing into youth.

*The best songs of the year:*

"Oh, what a beautiful mornin'," in *Oklahoma!*; "Ma Belle Marguerite," in *Bless the Bride*.

*The wittiest scene of the year:*

The ending of the second act of Noel Coward's *Present Laughter*, in which passion is discussed, though only the Albert Hall is mentioned.

*The best stage-setting:*

Anthony Holland's third-act set for *Lady Frederick* at the Savoy (1946).

## THEATRE

*The best-directed play of the year:*

*The Relapse*, at the Lyric, Hammersmith, directed by Anthony Quayle.

*The year's cleverest piece of technique:*

Was the means by which Noel Coward obtained a willing suspension of disbelief for his flat reversal of recent history in *Peace in Our Time*.

## AND BRICKBATS

*The year's biggest disappointment:*

*The Voice of the Turtle*, at the Piccadilly.

*The worst-acted play of the year:*

*Oak Leaves and Lavender*, at the Lyric, Hammersmith.

## APPENDIX II

### A MATTER OF MONEY

Here are a few statistics about three very successful productions in what was, on the whole, a financially prosperous year. The three productions represent three different classes of entertainment. *Oklahoma!* is a phenomenally popular commercial musical comedy; *Edward, My Son* a highly successful commercial drama (and none the worse for that); whilst *You Never Can Tell*, at Wyndham's, is an example of the comparatively new kind of non-profit-distributing cultural play which, freed from Entertainment Tax, was first made possible during the 1939-45 war by the institution of the Arts Council (then the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts).

The figures below roughly approximate to the utmost financial prosperity the London theatre can in these days attain:

### OKLAHOMA!

Produced at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, on Wednesday, April 30, 1947.

Number of performances to December 6, 1947

284

## APPENDIX

Number of people paying to see it	633,320
Record takings at any one performance	£849 6 8
Total receipts after deduction of Entertainment Tax and Library discount	£229,626 14 6

### EDWARD, MY SON

By Robert Morley and Noel Langley. Produced at His Majesty's Theatre on Friday, May 30, 1947. Later transferred to the Lyric Theatre.

Number of performances to December 31, 1947	276
Number of people paying to see it:	
On pre-London provincial tour	50,000
In London	300,000
Record takings at any one performance	£428
Total box-office receipts:	
In London	£75,000
In provinces	£10,000
Cost of production	£8,000

### YOU NEVER CAN TELL

By Bernard Shaw. Produced at Wyndham's Theatre on Friday, October 3, 1947.

Number of performances to December 31, 1947	100
Number of people paying to see it	112,000
Record takings at any one performance	£350
Total receipts (no Entertainment Tax payable)	£28,000
Cost of production	£2,500

## APPENDIX III

### YOUNG PLAYERS

Here I give a list of young actors and actresses, mostly or all under thirty, whose work has given me particular pleasure:

BASS, ALFIE, in *He Who Gets Slapped* and *Finian's Rainbow*.

DEAN, ISABEL, in *Romeo and Juliet* (at the Boltons).

EASON, MYLES, in *Romeo and Juliet* (at Stratford and His Majesty's).

GOUGH, MICHAEL, in *But for the Grace of God*.

## THEATRE

GRAY, DOLORES, in *Annie Get Your Gun*.  
 HOLDER, OWEN, in *The Amiable Mrs. Luke*.  
 LONGMAN, RICHARD, in *Now Barabbas* . . .  
 MILLER, JOAN, in *Dark Summer*.  
 NELSON, MARGARET AULD, in *Oklahoma!*.  
 REECE, BRIAN, in *Bless the Bride*.  
 SCOFIELD, PAUL, in *A Phoenix too Frequent*.  
 WEBB, LIZBETH, in *Bless the Bride*.  
 WEBBER, ROBERT, in *The Hidden Years*.

## APPENDIX IV

### NEW PLAYS OF THE YEAR

#### WRANGLERS

*Edward, My Son*, at His Majesty's.  
*Now Barabbas* . . ., at the Boltons and the Vaudeville.  
*Bless the Bride*, at the Adelphi.  
*Oklahoma!*, at Drury Lane.

#### WOODEN SPOONS

*This Virtue*, at the New Lindsey.  
*Caviar to the General*, at the Whitehall.  
*The Anonymous Lover*, at the Duke of York's.  
*Dark Emanuel*, at the New Lindsey.  
*The Birdseller*, at the Palace.

## APPENDIX V

### NOTABLE RUNS OF 1946-7

Plays marked with an asterisk were still running on December 31, 1947.

<i>Perchance to Dream</i>	Hippodrome	1,020
* <i>Piccadilly Hayride</i>	Prince of Wales's	747
* <i>Sweetest and Lowest</i>	Ambassadors	682

# APPENDIX

* <i>Here, There, and Everywhere</i>	Palladium	460
* <i>Together Again</i>	Victoria Palace	449
<i>Born Yesterday</i>	Garrick	338
* <i>Oklahoma!</i>	Drury Lane	310
* <i>Present Laughter</i>	Haymarket	293
* <i>Bless the Bride</i>	Adelphi	285
<i>Jane</i>	Aldwych	280
* <i>Edward, My Son</i>	His Majesty's	276
* <i>Life with Father</i>	Savoy	256
<i>The Man from the Ministry</i>	Comedy	220
<i>But for the Grace of God</i>	St. James's	206
<i>Noose</i>	Saville	171
<i>The Eagle has Two Heads</i>	Haymarket	170
<i>Peace in Our Time</i>	Lyric	167
<i>Now Barabbas . . .</i>	Vaudeville	164
<i>Trespass</i>	Globe	157
* <i>The Chiltern Hundreds</i>	Vaudeville	148
<i>Deep are the Roots</i>	Wyndham's	135
* <i>Tuppence Coloured</i>	Globe	129
<i>She Wanted a Cream Front Door</i>	Apollo	129
* <i>One, Two, Three</i>	Duke of York's	126
* <i>Starlight Roof</i>	Hippodrome	117
* <i>Anna Lucasta</i>	His Majesty's	97
<i>The Man in the Street</i>	St. James's	76
* <i>Canaries Sometimes Sing</i>	Garrick	64
<i>The Nightingale</i>	Princes	63
* <i>Honour and Obey</i>	Saville	62
<i>Murder in the Cathedral</i>	Mercury	62
<i>Outrageous Fortune</i>	Winter Garden	54
<i>The Dubarry</i>	Princes	53
<i>The Play's the Thing</i>	St. James's	48
* <i>Private Enterprise</i>	St. James's	42
<i>Candida</i>	Piccadilly	39
<i>The Farmer's Wife</i>	Apollo	29
<i>Othello</i>	Piccadilly	22
* <i>Dark Summer</i>	St. Martin's	16
<i>The Animal Kingdom</i>	Playhouse	13
* <i>Macbeth</i>	Aldwych	12
<i>Angel</i>	Strand	10

## IN THE ILLUSTRATIONS

COMPTON, FAY. Born in London on September 18, 1894. Made her first appearance at the Albert Hall, January 1906, in a Christmas fantasy called *Sir Philomir; or Love's Victory*. Her first appearance on the stage proper was in 1911, with Pelissier's Follies, at the Apollo. After staying with the Follies till 1913, and subsequently acting frequently both in London and New York, she played the heroine in Barrie's *Mary Rose* at the Haymarket in April 1920. Since then she has been one of the fixed stars of the London stage.

She has a cottage at Singleborough, near Bletchley, in Buckinghamshire. She says, "As you can see, I live in the country whenever I can get there, and infinitely prefer it to living in any town, and the more countrified it is the better I like it. I am very keen on replanning, redecorating, and, in some cases, rebuilding old houses that I have come across, and I've had a lot of fun reconstructing three very different types of houses in the last twenty years or so.

"Gardening I am very fond of, and planning out a new garden is to me a very thrilling occupation. I am also extremely fond of animals, especially horses and dogs, and I imagine that most strays know me for a 'sucker,' as I generally find them, or they find me, and spend the rest of their lives with me! I am very fond of reading, and Dickens is one of my favourite authors, but while I am working . . . I find a good thriller is the best way of relaxing. Whenever I have the time I like to go to a good concert, as I am very fond of music, and there was a time when I thought I was going to be a great pianist! I used to work very hard at dancing and singing, and as recreation I used to be keen on riding, golf, and tennis."

Miss Compton is the only actress I know whose typewriter writes entirely in italics.

GRAY, DOLORES. Born Chicago, June 7, 1924. She was educated in parochial and public schools in California, where she was taken when a few months old. At school she wanted to go on the stage: but she prudently learned French, book-



## APPENDIX

keeping, and shorthand, just in case. She is a graduate of the United States radio (she was taken up early in her career by Rudy Vallée) and night clubs, being one of the Copacabana set. After her great success on the first night of *Annie Get Your Gun*, Miss Gray, who is a tremendous worker, spent three terms at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, at the same time playing Annie Oakley eight times a week. For two terms she studied Shakespearean acting, and the third term she devoted to modern plays. Her most precious possessions appear to be her memories of the New York stores, which she saw for the first time in 1945, a black Skye terrier called Michael, and a twenty-volume eighteenth-century edition of Shakespeare illustrated with steel engravings. This was sent to her by a Yorkshire admirer, who rather ungallantly accompanied it with a pair of spectacles. "It's the sweetest gift I ever had," she says. She is a frequenter of antique shops, in Kensington rather than Mayfair, and she looks rather than buys. Quite natural and unaffected: referring to the eggs she has sent from Canada, she says, "I need the protein in a part as strenuous as Annie"; and without self-consciousness quotes her friends' description of her as the "toast of London." A Roman Catholic, she attends Farm Street Church, and goes nowhere without her mother.

GUINNESS, ALEC. Born April 2, 1914. Educated at Pembroke Lodge, Southbourne, and Roxborough, Eastbourne. Is married to Merula Salaman, whom he met when they were both in *Noah* at the New Theatre, July 1935, when he was the Wolf and she the Tiger. Has one son, for whom he has just made a scale-model sailing dinghy and a railway station. His first tail suit was a present from Laurence Olivier, for whom he understudied Hamlet at the Old Vic in 1937.

He likes English and Russian classic novels, biography, and travel books if they deal with mountains or deserts. Of modern novelists he finds only Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, and Bemelmans completely satisfactory. He judges *David Copperfield* to be the greatest English novel, but has a feeling that perhaps it should be *Tristram Shandy* or *The Egoist*.

Undoubtedly the greatest stage performance he has ever

seen, he declares, was Ernest Milton's Hamlet at Sadler's Wells about 1933. Then he becomes slightly conscience-stricken at not having chosen Edith Evans's Rosalind or Katina Paxinou's Electra.

"Always wanted to go on the stage," he says, "and I felt I could act when I was nine, but was utterly ignorant as to how to start. Consciously decided to try to make it my career when about sixteen (went through the usual indecision as to whether it should be the Church or the Stage—it's extraordinary how those two institutions are linked in the human soul!). Advertising agency until I was nineteen. Then scholarship to Fay Compton Studio. Only remained there six months as it wasn't a monetary scholarship, and my minute private funds gave out. John Gielgud took active steps to help me—he's a wonderfully generous and great man. My first proper job, understudying and two lines in *Queer Cargo* at the Cambridge (1934), was so awful and miserable that I really thought I'd never be able to stick the theatre.

"I got my first break by running into Gielgud (on purpose) at an Old Vic matinée of Maurice Evans's *Richard II*. He said, 'I've been looking all over London for you. Come and play Osric for me. Start rehearsals to-morrow at the New. Seven pounds a week.' That was a *fortune* to me then, apart from everything else. After I'd been rehearsing for a fortnight he suddenly told me I was so bad and stiff . . . that I must take a week off to relax and get someone like Martita Hunt to help me. So I did that, feeling very sick at heart. And it all turned out all right and I got my first notice. . . . After that I was never out of work, except for a couple of months in the summer of 1935, I think.

"After Gielgud I was taken up by Guthrie. This was ideal. Gielgud provided a wonderful background of discipline (something that has disappeared from the theatre in the last twelve years), neatness, clarity of speech, classical approach—but he was cramping for someone like me. Guthrie provided all the freedom and relaxation in the world and opened up vistas of new interpretation and experimental slapdashery. After a bit of that, in which I expanded, back to Gielgud for all the other qualities again. And so on. Those two men have meant

## APPENDIX

everything to me as an actor. The next person to influence me as an artist was Edith Evans—meeting her and getting to know her provided a new set of values in acting.”

**HAWKINS, JACK.** Born in London, September 14, 1910. Studied for the stage with Italia Conti. First stage appearance at the Holborn Empire, when he walked on in *Where the Rainbow Ends*, on Boxing Day, 1923. In March 1924, played Denois's Page in *Saint Joan*. At the Royalty, in January 1932, made a great success as Jerry Hammond in *While Parents Sleep*, a play over which the popular papers made a great fuss because it contained a word alleged never to have been spoken previously on the stage. This word occurred in a phrase spoken by Mr. Hawkins, who thus early in his career prepared himself for the freedom of utterance indulged in by Othello. He joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in 1940, and in July 1944 became Colonel in command of ENSA.

His hobbies used to be riding and fishing, but he says that the army has cured him of being “an open-air man” for all time. He still, however, plays “erratic golf with pleasurable irritation.” In books he cares most for autobiography, the fourth leader of *The Times*, and the greater part of the *New Yorker*. But his real pleasure is music: music, however, played by other people, and not by himself.

**HELPMANN, ROBERT.** Born Mount Gambier, South Australia, April 9, 1911. Educated at Prince Alfred's College in Adelaide. Undeterred by failing in his youth to pass an elementary dancing examination, he has become the leading male dancer of the British Commonwealth. He has had no comparable failure as an actor.

**MOLLISON, CLIFFORD.** Born in London, 1897. Educated in Scotland and at Thanet College. Married Muriel Pope. Made his first appearance on the stage at the Criterion, on January 16, 1913, as Bertie Bradley in *Billie's Fortune*. Has played innumerable parts in musicals and straight plays in London. He joined the Army in 1940, and was demobilized in 1945. He describes himself as “an outdoor chap who reads, and loves

music and painting; and an indoor chap who plays cricket, golf, tennis, and flies aeroplanes." He holds a pilot's "A" licence, and "a ten handicap at golf (with great difficulty)." His highest cricket score is 124; his best performance was 78 not out, three wickets and five catches, but he can't remember against whom; guesses they could not have been much good. In response to a question as to who is his favourite batsman, he is liable to become eloquent. "A genius on a tightrope?—Woolley. A master craftsman?—Hobbs. Puck?—Eddie Paynter. Do you want grace?—Spooner. Do you want majesty?—Grace. Thrills?—Jessop. The epitomization of all that best represents the English amateur?—Percy Chapman in his halcyon days." His favourite novelists? Thackeray, Hardy, Galsworthy, Tolstoy. "I think the most *shatteringly* well-written books I have ever read are *Esmond*, *Tess*, *Lorna Doone*, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*."

RITCHARD, CYRIL. Born in Sydney, New South Wales, on December 1, 1898. Educated at St. Aloysius College, and (as a doctor) at Sydney University. Made his first appearance on the stage in the chorus of *A Waltz Dream*, at Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney, in 1917, and after three months was promoted to juvenile leads and light comedy parts. When he came to England in 1925 he became very successful in silk-hat, white-tie dancing parts with Madge Elliott (whom he married) in a series of musical comedies with Leslie Henson, Laddie Cliff, and Stanley Lupino. His humorous talents, however, lay unused for years, until they reappeared in the revue, *Nine Sharp*, at the Little Theatre, in January 1938. Ever since then comedy and Mr. Ritchard have been on very friendly terms.

SPEAIGHT, ROBERT. Born at St. Margaret-at-Cliffe, near Dover, on January 14, 1904. Educated at Haileybury and Lincoln College, Oxford. At Oxford was Secretary of the O.U.D.S., and played Peer Gynt and Falstaff. Was in the long run of *Journey's End*, and has become identified with the part of Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Has written four novels and enjoys fox-hunting.

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